

10¢

SECRET AGENT X

DETECTIVE X MYSTERIES

ALL
STORIES
NEW!

CORPSE CONTRABAND

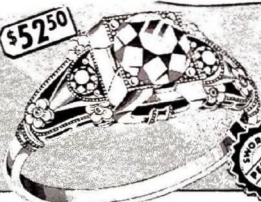
*Sensational
"Secret Agent X" Novel*

By
BRANT
HOUSE

DECEMBER



\$5250



A351—Sworn Perfect diamond with 2 other diamonds in 14K yellow gold mounting. Affidavit of Perfection with purchase. Regular \$75.00 value.

\$5.15 a month

\$2995



A147—Sworn Perfect diamond feature. Brilliant perfect diamond in 14K yellow gold mounting. Regularly \$50.00.

\$2.90 a month



D8—2 diamonds and blue sapphire in massive 14K yellow gold mounting for men. A real bargain.

\$2.25 a month

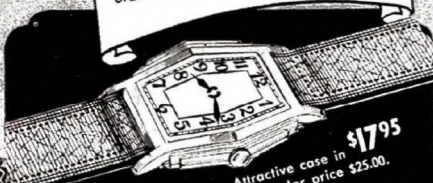
\$595

W2—10K yellow gold cross with chain to match. Cross beautifully engraved. Splendid value.

\$1.00 a month

Here's Jewelry Gift us an envelope with your name, address, and the number of the article wanted. Tell us your age (must be over 20), occupation, employer, and a few simple facts about yourself. Information will be held strictly confidential—no direct inquiries will be made.

Upon arrival of your order, we will open a 10 month Charge Account for you, and send your selection for approval and free trial. If not satisfied, send it back and your \$1.00 will be refunded immediately. If satisfied, pay the balance in 10 small monthly amounts you will never miss. Send order today.



K162-21 JEWEL watch for men. Attractive case in charm and color of natural gold. Regular price \$25.00.

\$1.70 a month



P238-2 DIAMONDS in ladies' tiny watch. Charm and color of natural gold. Guaranteed 7 Jewel movement. Regular price \$28.00.

\$1.70 a month



R125—The Barbara—a 17 Jewel Bulova feature. Tiny watch in charm and color of natural gold.

\$2.88 a month



M127—The Bulova "Rite-Angle" watch—a 17 Jewel feature in charm and color of natural gold. Tilted at the right angle to your eye. It's new.

\$2.88 a month

BACK GUARANTEE

\$3350



A50—Bridal pair—engagement and wedding ring designed to match in 14K yellow gold. Each set with 5 brilliant diamonds.

\$3.25 a month



1455—Massive 14K yellow gold initial ring for men. Diamond and initials on black onyx.

\$1.90 a month



FREE TO ADULTS. Complete catalogue of Diamonds, Watches, Jewelry and Silverware on our 10 month deferred payment terms. Sent free upon request.

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OF FINLAY STRAUS
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To run local COFFEE AGENCY

Splendid Chance
To Make Up To **\$60⁰⁰** in a Week



**NEW FORDS
GIVEN AS A BONUS**

If you want an unusual opportunity to make a fine cash income operating a Coffee Agency right in your locality, send your name at once for full details about my plan—FREE.

This opportunity is open to one person—man or woman—in each locality, or two persons operating in partnership. Local Coffee Agency is ideally suited for married couples; wife takes care of orders and handles calls at home, while husband delivers and collects. Earnings start very first day. Prosperous business of 200 regular customers quickly developed through remarkable, tested plan.

START EARNING AT ONCE

I'll send you everything you need—your complete outfit containing full-size packages of products, also printed forms, blanks, advertising matter, samples, etc., together with simple, proven plans showing exactly what to do to make good money right from the start. Make as high as \$45.00 your very first week. Everybody uses Coffee, Tea, Cocoa, Spices, Flavoring Extracts, Cosmetics, Soaps, Toilet Goods, and other food products and similar daily necessities. They MUST BUY these things to live. You simply take care of your regular customers right in your locality—just keep them supplied with the things they need. You handle all the money and pocket a big share of it for yourself. You keep all the profits—you don't divide up with anyone. Hundreds of housewives in many localities are waiting, right now, to be served with these nationally famous products.

I SEND EVERYTHING

Just as soon as I hear from you I will send you complete details—tell you all the inside workings of this nation-wide Coffee Agency Plan. I will explain just how to establish your customers; how to give them service and make good cash earnings. You can plan it so you give only 5 days a week to your business, collect your profits on Friday, and have all day Saturday and Sunday for vacation or rest. The plans I send you took years to perfect. You know they must be good because they have brought quick help to hundreds of other men and women, both married and single, who needed money.

FORD CARS GIVEN

Over and above the cash earnings you make, I offer you a brand new Ford Sedan as a bonus for producing. This is not a contest or a raffle. I offer a Ford Car—as an extra reward—to everyone who starts in this business.

YOU DON'T RISK A PENNY

You can start a Coffee Agency and make money the first week. You don't have to risk a cent. I absolutely guarantee this. No experience is needed. You use your home as headquarters. You can build your business on my money. Full details of money-making plans are free. Send your name today for the free book giving all inside facts, then you can decide. Don't waste a minute as you might lose this opportunity through unnecessary delay. ACT AT ONCE.

ALBERT MILLS

6483 Monmouth Avenue Cincinnati, Ohio

NOT A CONTEST

Not a lottery. Not a game of chance. You don't have to "win" to get a Ford Car of your own. I give these Ford Cars to producers as a bonus over and above their cash profits, to encourage prompt service to their customers. The car becomes your personal property with no strings attached.

AND HERE IS POSITIVE PROOF OF BIG EARN- ING POSSIBILITIES

Can you make money with a Coffee Agency? Yes. Here's a way to make it FAST! If only three or four people had made money as fast as this, you might call it an accident. But many have done it! Here are only a few—if space permitted I could print scores of exceptional earning reports:

	Amount Earned in One Week
F. J. Mosher, Wyo.	\$ 69.00
Wilbur W. Whitcomb, Ohio ...	146.00
Clare C. Wellman, N. J.	96.00
Mrs. A. Anderson, Conn.	75.00
A. Pardini, Calif.	69.00
Norman Geisler, Mich.	136.50
Gunsen R. Wood, N. Y.	82.10
Lamar C. Cooper, Mich.	82.00
Helen V. Woodmington, Penna.	45.00
Ruby Hansen, W. Va.	73.00
Hans Coordes, Neb.	96.40
Lambert Wilson, Mich.	79.00
W. J. Way, Kans.	76.15

The above reports of exceptional earnings show the amazing possibilities of my offer. Don't let this opportunity pass—send me your name for FREE Facts.

Free Offer COUPON

MAIL COUPON NOW!

SEND NO MONEY — FREE

Albert Mills, President,
6483 Monmouth Avenue, Cincinnati, Ohio

Send your free book telling how to start a Local Coffee Agency in which a married couple (or a single person) can make up to \$60.00 in a week. I will read it and then let you know if I want to accept this opportunity.

Name

Address

(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Please mention ACE FICTION GROUP when answering advertisements

Vol. 14
No. 2

SECRET AGENT **X** DETECTIVE MYSTERIES

DEC.
1938



CORPSE CONTRABAND

Sensational "Secret Agent X" Novel

By **BRANT HOUSE**

11

Ten thousand years ago it had been written in brass that the Yezidee would overrun the world with blood. And now Erlika, daughter of Satan, had smuggled in the Yezidee to form an unholy alliance with the American underworld. And Secret Agent X—man of a thousand faces—found himself stalemated by ageless magic and barbaric cruelty.

BULLET BUSINESS Robert W. Thompson 62

If you want to live a long time, mind your own business. A private detective is paid to mind somebody else's business. Doug Collins was a shamue—who liked to earn his pay.

HOMICIDE MASTER (Novelette) . Norman A. Daniels 71

Fate gave Headquarters Detective Max Stoddard a break when it put him on the murder scene at the crucial moment. But in her own way Fate made up for it, for Stoddard found himself up against a crime master.

And the only way he could solve this murder was for him to—
commit a murder himself.

MEMO FOR MURDER Leo Stalnaker 83

All the homicide knowledge Chief of Detectives York had couldn't keep the murder finger from pointing to—his own brother.

PINCH-HIT FOR DEATH . . . Frank P. Lockwood 91

State Trooper Steve Barry was scheduled to be the second corpse in the family.

MR. SLEUTH, B. A. William R. Cox 99

Skeets Perryman found that a college degree has more uses than one on a homicide squad.

Cover by R. Quigley

This is an ACE Magazine — See Page 8

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Established 1914**

The man who has directed the home study training of more men for the Radio Industry than any other man in America.



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Manager
for Four
Stores**

"I was working in a garage when I enrolled with N. R. I. In a few months I made enough to pay for the course three or four times. I am now Radio service manager for the M. Furniture Co., for their four stores." — **JAMES E. RYAN, 1535 Blade St., Fall River, Mass.**

**\$40 a Month
in
Spare Time**



"I have a very good spare time trade. At times it is more than I can handle. I make on an average of \$40 per month profit, and that is spare time working week ends and some evenings." — **IRA BIVANS, 918½ E. 3rd St., Rock Falls, Ill.**



**Earnings
Tripled
by N.R.I.
Training**

"I have been doing nicely, thanks to N. R. I. Training. My present earnings are about three times what they were before I took the Course. I consider N. R. I. Training the finest in the world." — **BERNARD COSTA, 201 Kent St., Brooklyn, N. Y.**

Clip the coupon and mail it. I will prove I can train you at home in your spare time to be a RADIO EXPERT. I will send you my first lesson FREE. Examine it, read it, see how clear and easy it is to understand—how practical I make learning Radio at home. Men without Radio or electrical knowledge become Radio Experts, earn more money than ever as a result of my Training.

Got Ready Now for Jobs Like These

Radio broadcasting stations employ engineers, operators, station managers and pay up to \$5,000 a year. Fixing Radio sets in spare time pays many \$200 to \$500 a year—full time jobs with Radio jobbers, manufacturers and dealers as much as \$50, \$50, \$75 a week. Many Radio Experts open full or part time Radio sales and repair businesses. Radio manufacturers and jobbers employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen, and pay up to \$6,000 a year. Automobile, police, aviation, commercial Radio, loud speaker systems are newer fields offering good opportunities now and for the future. Television promises to open many good jobs soon. Men I trained have good jobs in these branches of Radio. Read how they got their jobs. Mail coupon.

Why Many Radio Experts Make \$30, \$50, \$75 a Week

Radio is young—yet it's one of our large industries. More than 28,000,000 homes have one or more Radios. There are more Radios than telephones. Every year millions of Radios get out of date and are replaced. Millions more need new tubes, repairs. Over \$50,000,000 are spent every year for Radio repairs alone. Over 5,000,000 auto Radios are in use; more are being sold every day, offering more profit-making opportunities for Radio experts. And RADIO IS STILL YOUNG, GROWING, expanding into new fields. The few hundred \$30, \$50, \$75 a week jobs of 20 years ago have grown to thousands. Yes, Radio offers opportunities—now and for the future!

Many Make \$5, \$10, \$15 a Week Extra in Spare Time While Learning

The day you enroll, in addition to our regular Course, I start sending Extra Money Job Sheets; show you how to do Radio repair jobs. Throughout your training I send plans and directions that made good spare time money—\$20 to \$50—for hundreds, while learning.

How You Get Practical Experience While Learning

I send you special Radio equipment; show you how to conduct experiments, build circuits illustrating important principles used in modern Radio receivers, broadcast stations and loud-speaker installations. This 50-50 method of training—with printed instructions and working with Radio parts and circuits—makes learning at home interesting, fascinating, practical. I ALSO GIVE YOU A MODERN, PROFESSIONAL ALL-WAVE, ALL-PURPOSE RADIO SET SERV-



ICING INSTRUMENT to help you make good money fixing Radios while learning and equip you with a professional instrument for full time jobs after graduation.

Money Back Agreement Protects You

I am so sure I can train you to your satisfaction that I agree in writing to refund every penny you pay me if you are not satisfied with my Lessons and Instruction Service when you finish. A copy of this agreement comes with my Free Book.

Find Out What Radio Offers You

Act Today. Mail the coupon now for sample lesson and 64-page book. They're free to any fellow over 18 years old. They point out Radio's spare time and full time opportunities and those coming in Television; tell about my training in Radio and Television; show you letters from men I trained, telling what they are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU! MAIL COUPON in an envelope, or paste on a postcard—NOW!

**J. E. Smith, President, Dept. 8MA3,
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

**MAIL
COUPON
NOW!**



**GOOD FOR BOTH 64 PAGE BOOK
SAMPLE LESSON FREE**

**J. E. SMITH, President, Dept. 8MA3
National Radio Institute, Washington, D. C.**

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send the sample lesson and your book which tells about the spare time and full time opportunities in Radio and explains your 50-50 method of training men at home in spare time to become Radio Experts. (Please write plainly.)

NAME.....AGE.....
ADDRESS.....
CITY.....STATE.....2FR

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20x4-20-16	2.10	30x3 1/2-16	2.30
20x4-20-17	2.10	30x3 1/2-17	2.30
20x4-20-18	2.20	30x3 1/2-18	2.40
20x4-20-19	2.25	30x3 1/2-19	2.45
20x4-20-20	2.30	30x3 1/2-20	2.50
20x4-20-21	2.35	30x3 1/2-21	2.55
20x4-20-22	2.40	30x3 1/2-22	2.60
20x4-20-23	2.45	30x3 1/2-23	2.65
20x4-20-24	2.50	30x3 1/2-24	2.70
20x4-20-25	2.55	30x3 1/2-25	2.75
20x4-20-26	2.60	30x3 1/2-26	2.80
20x4-20-27	2.65	30x3 1/2-27	2.85
20x4-20-28	2.70	30x3 1/2-28	2.90
20x4-20-29	2.75	30x3 1/2-29	2.95
20x4-20-30	2.80	30x3 1/2-30	3.00
20x4-20-31	2.85	30x3 1/2-31	3.05
20x4-20-32	2.90	30x3 1/2-32	3.10
20x4-20-33	2.95	30x3 1/2-33	3.15
20x4-20-34	3.00	30x3 1/2-34	3.20
20x4-20-35	3.05	30x3 1/2-35	3.25
20x4-20-36	3.10	30x3 1/2-36	3.30
20x4-20-37	3.15	30x3 1/2-37	3.35
20x4-20-38	3.20	30x3 1/2-38	3.40
20x4-20-39	3.25	30x3 1/2-39	3.45
20x4-20-40	3.30	30x3 1/2-40	3.50
20x4-20-41	3.35	30x3 1/2-41	3.55
20x4-20-42	3.40	30x3 1/2-42	3.60
20x4-20-43	3.45	30x3 1/2-43	3.65
20x4-20-44	3.50	30x3 1/2-44	3.70
20x4-20-45	3.55	30x3 1/2-45	3.75
20x4-20-46	3.60	30x3 1/2-46	3.80
20x4-20-47	3.65	30x3 1/2-47	3.85
20x4-20-48	3.70	30x3 1/2-48	3.90
20x4-20-49	3.75	30x3 1/2-49	3.95
20x4-20-50	3.80	30x3 1/2-50	4.00
20x4-20-51	3.85	30x3 1/2-51	4.05
20x4-20-52	3.90	30x3 1/2-52	4.10
20x4-20-53	3.95	30x3 1/2-53	4.15
20x4-20-54	4.00	30x3 1/2-54	4.20
20x4-20-55	4.05	30x3 1/2-55	4.25
20x4-20-56	4.10	30x3 1/2-56	4.30
20x4-20-57	4.15	30x3 1/2-57	4.35
20x4-20-58	4.20	30x3 1/2-58	4.40
20x4-20-59	4.25	30x3 1/2-59	4.45
20x4-20-60	4.30	30x3 1/2-60	4.50

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It's plain truth that the way you talk determines at once what others think of you. That's all they have to go by. And to get ahead, you have to make them listen to what you say. You must make them think so well of you that they will want to help you, want to put in a good word for you.



Skill at your trade makes you a foreman or plant supt. much faster, when you have the advantage of effective English to help you.

right sort of friends, the ahead—that's a handicap you're sure to feel.

Schooling Makes No Difference

Perhaps you, like so many others, had to quit school before you could finish. That's no disgrace. But nothing is so likely to give you away now, at the very moment when you can least afford it, as the improper use of English. Yet you can never know the mistakes you may be making until you have some sure way of finding them!

Would you like to have an amazingly easy way to do just that?—a quick, simple way that has shown other men who never went to college—thousands who never graduated from high school—thousands more who never even finished grade school—how to speak so well that others say of them, "There goes a successful man!"

New Invention—SELF-Correcting

Do you work at a desk? Effective English makes you more important in the office—makes your letters and reports get RESULTS!



Over 100,000 other men and women have already taken advantage of such a method—a remarkably simple invention by Sherwin Cody—the man who sensibly realized that the average person doesn't want to fuss around with teachers; or dull "rules" to study; or tiresome lessons to write out.



SHERWIN CODY

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Knowing how to make others say "yes" is what makes big pay for a salesman. Better English helps you set NEW RECORDS!



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NAME

ADDRESS

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Name
Address
City State
Attach letter stating age, occupation and name and address of employer and that of at least one business man as reference.

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The trapdoor opened. Scarred, cruel faces appeared—and flashing knives.

CHAPTER I

CARGO OF CORPSES

Ten thousand years ago it had been written in brass that the Yezidee would overrun the world with blood. And now Erlika, the daughter of Satan, had smuggled in the Yezidee to form an unholy alliance with the American underworld. And Secret Agent X—man of a thousand faces—found himself stalemated by ageless magic and barbaric cruelty.

AT DUSK, Morton Edgewood peered out of the leaded glass window in the office of his Old Colonial Pottery Shop. It was an evening of deadly calm. A drowsy heat had settled upon the city. These were dog days. Some called it suicide weather, others the moon of madness.

The moon looked anything but mad. Above the stagnant, dust-gray leaves of the maples on the other side

of the street, the moon showed its face, pallid and consumptive. Morton Edgewood sighed as he closed his account book. He anticipated without pleasure his bed in the rooms above the shop. The shop, which was in a residential district in the city of Maywood, was air-conditioned for the comfort of his fastidious patrons.

But Edgewood's narrow margin of profit had not permitted him to extend the air-conditioning to his bachelor quarters above. His rooms would be oven-hot tonight. He had half a notion to drag down a mattress and sleep in his office. Except for his old man's sense of modesty, he would have done that. But the large, leaded glass window of his office had no blind.

A droning sound, as hot and irritating as the buzz of locusts, came up the street. A dusty van stopped in front of the shop, its back facing the entrance to the shop. Morton Edgewood pulled his brassy-looking spectacles down half the length of his thin beak. The driver of the van was getting out, a notebook in his hand. Morton Edgewood was puzzled. The van bore a Texas license beneath one of its tail-lights.

The brass knocker on the door of the shop clacked imperatively. Edgewood straightened up from his book, opened the office door, stepped into the shop. The knocker clacked again. He took hold of the door knob, pulled the door open, at the same time turning on the entrance light.

The driver of the van stood there with the stub of a pencil in one hand and his receipt book in the other. He shoved pencil and book at Edgewood. He was very tired. His gray shirt was nearly black across his chest because of sweat. Black hairs, visible at the open neck of his shirt, glistened against tanned flesh. He had a dull, heavy-featured face.

"What is it?" Edgewood demanded. "Haven't you the wrong address?"

The driver backed up, looked at the numbers of the shop. "Your name's

Edgewood, isn't it? This is the Colonial Pottery Shop, isn't it? No, I don't have the wrong address. Sign on the bottom."

"I'm not expecting anything," Edgewood said. "There's some mistake."

The driver scowled. "Listen, if your name is Edgewood I got a load of Mexican pottery. It was shipped F. O. B. and I'm collecting the freight on this. One hunnert and forty-eight bucks freight charges."

"I am not expecting anything," said Edgewood. "You've made a mistake."

THE DRIVER shoved his hat back on his head. "You kiddin' me? If you are kiddin' me, get it that I ain't in the mood. I been on the road three days with this stuff and if you think it's hot here, you ought to sit over a damned truck motor and drive up from Texas some time."

"If you'll step inside," Edgewood suggested kindly, "you can cool off and have a glass of lemonade."

The driver laughed. "Listen, old man, you pay the freight and I'll buy my own drinks."

Edgewood stiffened. "I am sorry. I ordered nothing. I am overstocked now." And the driver took a belligerent step forward. Edgewood slammed the door and pushed over the bolt. The driver grabbed the knocker and clacked it angrily. He yelled: "If I camp here all night, you're goin' to pay me—through the pocketbook or through the nose."

"Young man," called Edgewood, "I don't like your attitude." He turned, walked stiffly back to his office. The presuming upstart! It was one of those rackets you hear about. It was—

Having just opened the door of the office, Edgewood paused, took half a step backward, his lips puckering to form a silent "Oh." There was a woman in his office. She was dressed in a long, summery dress of frothy black stuff ornamented with a

sprinkle of sequins that sent forth darts of light like stars in a dark sky. Her face he could not see because of her hat, which, to Edgewood's eye, untrained in such matters, resembled a Salvation Army lassie's bonnet.

Her costume was sheerest witchery, sleeveless, low cut, and in a measure old-fashioned. Tight little curls clustered at the nape of her neck. Fragile-looking, silvery sandals were on her small, narrow feet.

She had not looked at him, yet it seemed she knew he was there and was giving him time to digest the charm of her figure and costume. Then she turned her head slowly toward him. An unaccountably cold sensation passed along Edgewood's spine. Then it was gone and he felt, alarmingly, that he had lost twenty years of his life in as many seconds.

She smiled, and there was something in her smile, in the glint of her teeth, that burned a single descriptive word on Edgewood's mind—*rapacious*. And in her nearly black narrow eyes with their obliquely slanting brows, he saw cruelty.

She was at one and the same time the most charmingly beautiful and entirely wicked-looking young woman he had ever seen.

"Sit down," she said, patting the bottom of his desk chair with her dark, slender-fingered hand.

EDGEWOOD crossed the office with a sprightly step he had not known for years. He sat down. "To what—er—do I owe this—er—pleasure?" he groped back through the dictionary of forgotten gallantry.

Her smile was amused. "Men usually want to ask how I get in."

"Well," he said, feeling the perfect idiot and enjoying it, "how did you get in? Were you wafted through the keyhole on the breath of a tropic breeze?"

She laughed deep in her throat. Her laugh was like a bar of music from Satan's Mass. "Breeze from the tropics or an updraft from hell?" she whispered, leaning rather closer to

him than he thought was necessary. Edgewood squirmed, delightfully uncomfortable.

She said: "You're rather a nice old thing."

"Old?" he muttered, and frowned at her laughter.

Her laughter stopped so suddenly that the silence startled him. For a moment of stark insanity, her eyes possessed him and he had an impulse to take her in his arms and crush her full red lips against his own. And then the deep tones of her voice came softly to his ears:

"There is a man outside with a load of pottery. I intend you to pay him what he asks and have the six large packages brought in here. The other pottery you may have, to do with as you will. But—the six great urns are mine."

"But—but," he stammered, "I ordered no pottery from Mexico."

"How do you know?" she said.

And without taking her eyes from his, she reached into a large, black bag made of the same frothy stuff as her dress, and produced a slip of paper. She held it out for him to see. It was an order blank filled out in his own handwriting and directed to a potters' firm in Mexico.

Edgewood looked up blankly. "I do not understand. I do not remember—"

"Of course not. But you will remember an odd feeling of sickness that came over you some weeks ago? You remember how unconsciousness stole upon you like night creeps across the horizon? How do you know *what* you did then, my friend? It was then that you wrote this order, for then you were mine. Then you belonged to Erlika, daughter of Erlik."

She leaned forward in her chair until her lips were within inches of his. "And do you know, when you were mine you didn't behave entirely as a gentleman should? Twice I had to remind you of your years." She shrugged. "*Hashish*—it is like that with some men."

Her hand touched his, and his first impulse was to jerk his hand away. But he let it linger and reveled in the thrill her touch gave him.

"You will pay the drayman like a good boy," she said, "and earn, perhaps, Erlika's lips for a little while."

Edgewood stumbled to his feet, left the office, went to the door of his shop. The truckster was sitting on the front steps. He turned, looked up at Edgewood.

"It's about time," he said. He stood up and handed Edgewood the book and pencil. Edgewood signed, reached into his pocket and took out a roll of bills. He counted out the money which the truckster carefully tucked away.

"I picked up a couple of loafers uptown," the driver announced. "They'll help me with the big packages. Where do you want the stuff?"

"Anywhere," said Edgewood dully. "In the shop, I suppose."

He stood back from the door to watch the unloading. There were a number of small cartons and six huge bundles packed in straw-lined crates which required two men to handle. Then the drayman and his assistants left the shop.

For a moment, Edgewood stood there in the absolute silence of his shop, staring at the large straw packages. A soft laugh from the door of the office caused him to turn around. The woman was standing there, lips and eyes taunting.

"Get a hammer, sweet old man," she ordered. "I want you to open these things for me."

WORDLESSLY, EDGEWOOD obeyed. With hammer and wrecking bar he removed the thin slats that crated the big straw packages. The woman ripped aside the straw from one after another to reveal, in each package, a graceful urn of rust and blue striped pottery, fully five feet in height and two feet wide at the top. Six urns in all stood in the midst of six heaps of straw in the center of the floor.

Edgewood stared in open-mouthed wonder. "What on earth are you going to do with these things, Miss?" he asked.

She smiled at him. "Just call me Erlika. I do not care for formalities. And hand me the hammer. I will show you what is to be done."

Edgewood obeyed, as he felt compelled to do. Again he thrilled at the touch of her hand as she took the hammer from him. Then she approached one of the urns, struck its bulging sides a sharp blow with the hammer. The thin, brittle clay smashed, fell into bits. And tumbling out among the fragments was the body of a man.

Erlika whirled on the pottery dealer. "You will not cry out," she warned sternly.

But Edgewood had never been farther from crying out. He could only stare glassily at the body on the floor. It was a man, swathed in white silk, legs doubled under him, arms crossed and bound flatly to his chest. Fingers of the hands, visible above the wrappings, were long, talonous things with cruel, curling nails.

The man's head was hairless, deeply yellow. His face, perfectly composed with closed eyes, none the less seemed but a mask for something more hideous than appeared on the surface. The lips were full, sensuous, the nose broad and flat. Cheek bones were high like an Indian's, but the skin that covered them was yellow. A squarish block of black beard centered the chin. A mustache drooped from the upper lip, lending the face an aspect of cruelty and ill nature.

The man on the floor was like a Chinese. Yet Edgewood knew perfectly that the man was not Chinese—not the native of south China with which he was familiar, but a man from Black China, impenetrable Inner Mongolia!

The woman went from one urn to another, smashing them with the hammer. From each rolled the silk-wrapped body of a hideous, yellow-



Tumbling out among the fragments was the body of a man.

faced man. And on every face a common trait was deeply etched—cruelty. As each Mongol appeared, Erlika's laugh rang out. She named them one by one: Djedstung, Damba, Gheghen, Hutuku, Bogdo, and Hun Taigi."

It was immediately after the appearance of the sixth yellow man on the floor that the door of the shop was flung open and a man stepped into the room. It was the truckster.

Erlika whirled from the wreckage of the last urn, her soft, velvety fingers moving with incredible speed to her black bag. When her hand darted from the bag, it held a small, black automatic. There was no smile

on her red lips as she faced the truckster.

"Close the door," she commanded. "Why have you returned?"

The truckster gulped in air through his mouth. "The receipt. The old man didn't give me the receipt. What the hell's goin' on in here? These—" He looked at the six yellow sleepers on the floor, and his gesture tried vainly to express what his words could not.

One hand on her hip, the other nursing the automatic carelessly, Erlika took swaying steps to the

truckster, avoiding the sharp bits of broken pottery. "You only want your receipt," she said softly when she was so close to him that the sparkling skirt of her gown touched the harsh, gray cloth of his trousers. "You would not go to the police and say what you have seen? Oh, no! You will not go!"

Her laugh taunted. Her black eyes cracked like twin whips at Edgewood. "Old man, you will pick up some of those cords and bind this man's hands and feet."

Edgewood hesitated. "I—I don't want to get mixed up in this."

Erlika's beautiful teeth gleamed. "You are already mixed up, as you say, in this. You were mixed up in it ten thousand years ago. When Erlik wrote upon tablets of brass in the Seventh Tower by the Lake of Spirits, you were mixed up in this. It was written there that an old fool would be mixed up in this. You will tie his hands, you old fool!"

EDGEWOOD stooped, fumbled with hemp cord that had come from the straw packages. He found pieces of the proper length and approached the truckster. Erlika watched, her head coquettishly cocked on one side. "He is so handsome a man," she said aloud, "that it is very unfortunate he is to die."

"Listen, sister," the truckster said, "I don't know what this is—"

"Stop, you pig!" Erlika's eyes flamed. "Erlika 'listens, sister' to no one. She is not your sister!"

The truckster gulped his words, mumbled beneath his breath: "Of all the screwy setups. Smuggling aliens in pottery!"

Erlika stepped back. From her black bag she took what appeared at first to be a lizard eight inches from snout to tail. The thing had an odd, metallic luster, yet so perfectly was it modeled that it seemed alive. She turned toward the astonished Edgewood, the lizard thing outstretched

toward him. From the open mouth of the thing in her hand a blue-gray cloud hissed straight into the pottery dealer's face.

Edgewood choked, strangled. And when the paroxysm had passed, his eyes were strangely glazed. He felt at first a feeling of impotence. Erlika advanced, took his hand, pressed something into his palm. He looked down dully. In his hand was a slender-bladed knife. He stared at it in horror, yet something compelled him to cling to it. He raised his eyes to Erlika's black, penetrating eyes. The woman was standing beside the bound truckster.

"In one moment you will try to escape me, Edgewood," she said. "You will try to fight your way out of here. But standing in the door is a man—a big, powerful man. You will feel a desire to kill. You will have to stab him to clear the way to the door."

The room seemed filled with fog. Only Erlika's hellishly beautiful eyes pierced the fog and possessed his soul. Something like liquid fire was poured into his veins. Suddenly, he could see with startling clarity the door of the shop and the truckster standing in it. Everything else belonged to another world.

Morton Edgewood gripped the knife. . . .

Morton Edgewood, age fifty-eight, bachelor, owner of the Old Colonial Pottery Shop, came shuddering from the realm of nightmare. There was in his mouth a bitter taste and in his mind a lingering reflection of his dream. He had stood on a ragged cliff surrounded by clouds. Above him he had seen a sky made of ink, yet twinkling with countless stars. Beside him on the cliff had been a man and a woman—a woman so beautifully made that he had thought her the most wonderful thing in the world.

He was young again, in his dream. The woman had given him a knife, and a promise. He had plunged the knife into the other man and derived

SAX

a hellish pleasure from twisting it in the wound.

A prayer quivered on Edgewood's lips. He was on the floor of his own shop. All about him were bits of red and blue pottery and little heaps of straw. Near the door was the body of a man—a man in gray with a truckster's cap on his head. In the center of the truckster's broad chest was a small wound from which blood seeped slowly.

Morton Edgewood got to his knees. He seized the edge of a counter and dragged himself to his feet. Only then did he notice that his right hand was tightly closed on the hasp of a knife. Blood formed ruby drops at the tip of the knife.

Edgewood's eyes jerked from one corner of the shop to the other. He staggered to his office, looked through the door. The place was empty. There were no signs of hideous, sleeping Mongols, save the bits of broken pottery on the floor of the shop. And no sign of a woman, Erlika.

With a hoarse cry that stark madness drove from his throat, Morton Edgewood ran from the shop, plunged into the hot, fragrant summer night.

BACK in the shop, the truckster stirred. The ropes had been removed from hands and feet. His eyes opened. Dully, at first, his eyeballs took in their surroundings. And then the dullness passed and there was terror there. Terror spurred him to his feet. Terror compelled his leaden feet to carry him staggering from the shop into the street. He tried to run, fell blindly into the arms of a policeman.

The cop's strong hands gripped the truckster. "Great hell, man!" he gasped. "You've been knifed."

Words rattled in the truckster's throat. Forked fingers clawed at his chest. "Edgewood," he husked, "knifed me." He seized the cop's arm in a grip that told of approaching death.

"Listen, for the love of heaven, I'm dying. . . . There's a woman with all hell in her eyes—so beautiful you wouldn't mind dying, just looking at her. She came—gave the old man something from a lizard—You John Laws—they're smuggling yellow devils in—bring 'em up through Mexico. Like Chinks, only different. . . . They put them in big—urns. . . ."

Blood that had welled into the man's throat choked him off. There was a final, strangled sigh, and he became limp in the policeman's arms.

There was no sense to it, the cop told himself, as he later surveyed the wreckage of pottery in the shop. Still, a report had to be made. He went to Edgewood's phone and called headquarters. There was no sense to it—yellow men in pottery urns, a woman with hell in her eyes, mild old Morton Edgewood stabbing a man.

But there was something in the report that made it imperative that the chief of police notify the Immigration Bureau at Washington—Asiatics sneaking across the border, coming up through Mexico in pottery urns. And eventually that report reached the ears of a gray-eyed, young-looking man seated in a visitor's chair beside an imposing desk. Behind the desk perched a small gray-haired man whose every birdlike movement indicated his highly nervous temperament.

"And that's the story," said the gray-haired official, his hands making a twitching gesture. "No man has seen hide nor hair—if they had hair—of the Asiatics. The man, Edgewood, is gone, too. Truckster's dead, so there you are. If you would like to run out to Maywood—nice town of about three hundred thousand."

"Why Maywood, K9?" asked the gray-eyed man in a deep, calm voice.*

"I haven't the slightest notion."

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: Agent X's immediate superior, a powerful Washington official, prefers to be known only as K9, his number during the period of his life in which he served as an intelligence officer. K9 is the only official sponsor of Secret Agent X.

"Maywood," said the gray-eyed man, his lips curving into a slightly ironic smile, "is a nice town. Its people work hard and are so completely occupied with their own affairs that they seldom even see their own neighbors. Some of their neighbors would bear watching.

"There's Art Murdo, for instance. Mr. and Mrs. Citizen of Maywood don't know, but Art Murdo filches a goodly per cent of their earnings from their pockets. He's the most high-handed racketeer in the country. And—" the gray-eyed man shrugged—"getting away with it."

He helped himself to one of K9's cigarettes. Behind a curtain of blue smoke, the gray eyes, infinitely brilliant and far-seeing, mused dreamily. "I wonder—"

"You wonder what?" K9 rapped. "My only objection to you—you're obscure. What are you wondering about, eh?"

The lips of the gray-eyed man twitched humorously. "I'd better go to Maywood where there are other obscure people like Art Murdo. But if it's any satisfaction to know, I was wondering if the very fact that Art Murdo makes his headquarters in Maywood isn't the reason why the Asiatics were shipped to Maywood. He could be in the alien smuggling business."

The gray-eyed man stood up, took the hand of K9. "By George," said the latter, "I'd like to go with you, but, damn it, my doctor never got through lecturing about my going to Hawaii with you that time."

The gray-eyed man laughed pleasantly. "The Yellow Peril scare never amounted to a great deal. This business at Maywood may not even prove interesting."

But deep within him that strange intuition that had more than once saved his life, warned gray-eyed Secret Agent X that deadly danger awaited him at the end of the journey to come.

CHAPTER II

THE MAN FROM MONGOLIA



The clerk at the desk of Hotel Mayfair leaned forward as the man in gray tweeds approached. The new arrival was not a man of appar-

ent distinction. His features were as commonplace as his subdued clothing. His hair was of an uncertain sandy color. Yet this man who accomplished virtual self-effacement was A. J. Martin, renowned feature writer of a famous newspaper syndicate. He was, also—though the clerk had no way of knowing it—Secret Agent X.

"We received your wire, Mr. Martin," said the clerk needlessly, "and have taken care of your requirements. I believe you will be entirely comfortable."

"Thanks." X wrote the signature of Martin on the register card. He turned from the desk and let his steely eyes wander thoughtfully across the elaborate lobby of the city's finest hotel. Little knots of young men with old faces who bore no baggage save tripods, flashlight equipment and cameras, were scattered across the room.

"Why the press convention?" X asked the clerk.

The clerk's eyebrows lifted. "Hadn't you heard? Really, I supposed that was what had brought you here, Mr. Martin. Prince Djamok, the Mongolian educator who has been touring this country for some time, was kidnapped. That is," the clerk corrected hastily, "almost. He claims to have routed his attackers—something which I was inclined to doubt, he is such a slight man.

"But not long ago one of the reporters who had tried to get into his rooms came out again very rapidly and was taken to the hospital. Prince Djamok refuses to see reporters and

is quite ferocious with intruders, it seems."

"Huh," X grunted. "Where's his room, by the way?"

"By the way, Mr. Martin!" The clerk chuckled. "The instinct of a newspaper man is showing itself! Prince Djamok's suite is directly below yours. Unfortunately, there is no connecting fire escape. And I would not attempt to see this Mongol. After all, if he can manage kidnapers and reporters—" The clerk concluded his caution with a shake of the head.

X laughed. "Oh, I'll keep out of his way—at least for the next two or three minutes." And he followed the bellhop, who was laden with his bags, to the elevator.

Prince Djamok, X had heard of the enlightened Mongol chief who had come to the Western hemisphere to take Occidental culture back with him to his native land. The Mongol was a great admirer of the English speaking people, having had an English tutor. And Djamok was a man of fabulous wealth—a perfect target for American crime, were it not for the fact that he had methods, apparently, of protecting himself.

In spite of the clerk's warning, or rather because of it, X decided to pay the Mongol prince a visit. His

trip to Maywood had been entirely without event, and a man of X's temperament could not long remain content with inactivity. No sooner was he installed in his new quarters than he carefully locked the door and proceeded to open one of his bags.

From this satchel he removed a circular metal disk about nine inches in diameter and not unlike a case for moving picture film in appearance. A metal hook protruded from the slot in one side of the case. On the opposite side was a leather-padded loop of metal that served as a hand hold. A triggerlike piece of metal extended from the case into the metal loop.

This device was the Agent's own version of the rope ladder, compact enough to be carried in one of the large pockets of his coat. Within the case was a fifty-foot coiled ribbon of highest tensile strength steel on a spring reel delicately balanced against the Agent's own weight. He had only to attach the metal hook to the inner side of the sill, roll up the screen that covered his window, seize the hand hold, and he was ready to descend the outer wall of the building.

HE hung to the loop, broke the rapidity of his descent with the trigger device in the center of the



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hand hold, and quickly and silently lowered himself to the window directly beneath his own. The roll type screen and the window shade of the Mongol's window were both pulled down tightly. He was prepared for this.

Hanging by one hand, he inserted a small wire hook into the mesh of the screen, pulled down, permitted the screen to roll to the top of the window. Then he reached in, cautiously took hold of the shade and raised it. Ahead was black uncertainty. Within that darkness was the man who had frightened away kidnapers and sent a newspaper man to the hospital. Agent X swung over the sill.

There was a box on the sill—something like a long, wood cheese box. In the darkness it might have easily been mistaken for the top of the sill itself. X did not know it was there. Not until it was too late to avoid its subtle trap.

As his hand touched the top of the box, the thing sprang apart. Its sides buckled beneath his weight, and the heel of his hand crushed down on something cool-skinned, slippery, alive. Cold coils whipped about his wrist.

X sprang into the room. His left hand darted to the breast pocket of his coat, came out with his pencil flashlight. He thrust the beam downward toward his wrist, and it centered upon the deadly beauty of a coral snake, its slender, striped body wrapped about his wrist, its head back and jaws open ready to strike.

With a swiftness that rivaled that of the striking snake itself, the Agent's left hand, bearing the flashlight, darted downward. There was no time to think. The angry little reptile had brought certain death within inches of the Secret Agent. Into the gaping, poisonous jaws, X jammed the end of the pencil light. He sprang to the right, encountered the elongated pulls of a floor lamp with his fingers, pulled, illuminated the room.

The dark venom of the snake spewed harmlessly over the metal body of the pen-light, drained each poison sac dry. Then X dropped the pen-light, his fingers darting to pinch directly behind the head of the infuriated serpent.

He pulled the writhing, sinuous body from his wrist, held it at arm's length, crossed the room to where a cigarette humidor rested upon a walnut table. He raised the lid of the box, popped the serpent inside, dropped the lid in place.

He stepped over to pick up his flashlight. As he stooped, he saw reflected in a decorative mirror on the wall, the door of the room opening. A yellow hand flashed through the door, shot across the top of a taboret beside the door, seized a knife. The hand was silently withdrawn and the door closed.

X calmly wiped the deadly serpent venom from his flashlight with his handkerchief, returned flashlight and handkerchief to his pocket. Then he crossed to the door through which had passed the yellow hand. It was not the only door which opened upon the living room of the prince's hotel suite, he learned a moment later. For as he opened the door, looked into an empty bedroom, a stealthy whisper of slipped feet behind him warned him that there was another entrance.

X pivoted, and the point of a knife met his throat. The man he faced was tall, slight. His features were delicately formed, his face oval, his mouth as sensitive as a woman's. His black hair was sleeked back from his forehead. On his chin was a small, neatly trimmed goatee. His almond-shaped eyes were soft, brown, deceptively gentle.

He was wearing green pajamas of American design, topped with a bathrobe of glaring, yellow Chinese silk. A Scotch pug pipe clasped in his white teeth was the final touch of grotesqueness. The yellow hand with which he held the hasp of the knife was marked with a bloody abrasion.

Evidently, Prince Djamok had met with a slight accident. All of which did not alter X's predicament in the slightest. The prince was perfectly capable of pinning him to the door panel with that knife.

"Having passed the snakes which guarded your window, your highness," X said coolly, "I meet the snake's master. I should have much less difficulty draining your fangs of poison than I had with the snake."

Djamok's smile was not pleasant. "I have given fair warning to Yankee—" he pronounced it *Yon-kee*—"newspaper men that the next intruders coming in are going out dead."

X LAUGHED. Though the ripple of the laugh in his throat brought his flesh against the tip of the knife, still he laughed. "*Tokhta!*"* he said quietly. "Have you forgot that I drained your serpent's fangs of poison?"

Djamok's smile was unaltered. "Boasting of past achievements no defense against present predicament."

"Past achievement," X mocked, "excellent foundation for future ones. I thrust my handkerchief into the jaws of your coral snake, drained its venom, wiped the handle of your knife with the venom. With that abrasion on your hand, there is some doubt in my mind about your lasting long enough to thrust that knife home, Djamok."

Not thinking that it would have been impossible for X to have known that the skin of his right hand was broken, Djamok, his face suddenly turning pale, dropped the knife. X immediately planted his foot on the knife, shoved Djamok back with his hands.

X laughed. "We've had our fun. Suppose we sit down. And do not offer me any of your cigarettes. The snake is in the humidior."

Djamok looked bewilderedly about the room. Then his smile gained

breadth, became more pleasant. He indicated a chair with a low bow. "Yankee cleverness," he admitted.

X grinned. Yankee nerve, perhaps. "You really are quite capable of taking care of yourself. It's no wonder that you foiled your kidnapers. Tell me about it."

Djamok sat down only after X was in a chair. He lighted his pipe. "I being most diligently reticent about unfortunate happening. I being not so sure of myself after you fooling me. I unacquainted with how Yankee newspaper man know Nomad-Mongol speech."

"I crossed Asia after the Red revolt in Russia," X said. "It was Mongolia or the firing squad. I chose Mongolia."

"My country was flattered," Djamok said.

X smiled grimly. "On the contrary, or else your country has very peculiar ideas about accepting compliments."

Djamok sighed. His brown eyes became sad. "I being very sorry for my country's ill manners toward strangers. Sometimes I being afraid my efforts wasted to tame my country."

"Were the kidnapers countrymen of yours, by any chance?" X asked, his eyes fixed shrewdly on the Mongol's face.

The brown eyes became inscrutable. "I being most reticent," Djamok insisted.

A short while later, X said good night to the Mongol. He returned to his room only long enough to reel up the steel ribbon with which he had accomplished his entrance into Djamok's rooms. Then he descended in the elevator to the lobby. His next move, he decided, was to visit Art Murdo, kingpin of Maywood crime. Murdo had done much to deserve such a meeting, and X was determined to put it off no longer. . . .

Above an east side tavern was a room which contrasted sharply with the dingy exterior of the building in which it was situated. The criminals who thrived under the protection of Art Murdo had a high standard of

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: "Look out!" Mongol dialect.

living developed by a continuance of prosperity. So this particular rendezvous for criminals was luxuriantly furnished.

There were five granite-faced men in the room, lounging in the soft cushioned chairs, smoking, their eyes, habitually void of expression, fixed on the sixth man, their leader. The sixth man was Monte Crespis, wasp-waisted, square-shouldered, red-haired, ape-faced.

Monte Crespis had a reputation envied by every heist man in the business. Monte had brains. When he cracked a bank or lifted a payroll, it was a clean job, because he planned his jobs as carefully as an architect might lay out a building. After that, he would lay his ideas before Art Murdo.

Only after he had gained Murdo's approval did Monte Crespis take up the matter with his five henchmen. So a meeting of Monte and his henchmen was an indication that things were about to happen in Maywood.

ONE THING that made Monte's reputation for brains what it was, was the fact that he had never stooped to murder. When you were really smart, he argued, you didn't have to hurt a guy to get him to part with his money. And you didn't have to kill half a dozen coppers to cover your trail, if you were smart; if you were smart and on the good side of Art Murdo.

Monte spread a large, square piece of paper out on the table in front of him. He jerked his ape's head to indicate that his henchmen should move within the circle of light cast by the ornate bridge lamp behind Monte's chair.

"I want you guys to get this and get it straight." That was always Monte's preamble to his lecture on the subject of how a particular job was to be carried out. Then his voice lowered as his men huddled about him. His stubby forefinger traced lines on the

paper. His blue eyes picked up the glow of enthusiasm.

In the middle of a sentence Monte stopped. He looked around at the five faces about him. A man muttered: "What's the matter, Monte?"

"Nothing," Monte replied. "Notice something? That piano downstairs stopped. All of a sudden. Everything is too damned quiet around here."

There was a tap at the door. Within the room breathing became shallow, jerky. Monte's eyes narrowed, slid toward the door. "See what it is, Cock," he said to one of his men.

A paunchy man with broken nose and flop ears pulled reluctantly away from the group. He slid back a small panel in the door, looked out into an unlighted hall. Enough light stole through the peephole for him to see the figure of the little shrimp Monte had placed on guard. Cock turned to Crespis. "Shrimp," he said.

"Open the door," Monte ordered. "What the hell's he bothering us about?"

Cock opened the door and Shrimp came in—not like he had ever come in before. He fell forward on his face, lay there in a motionless heap, a yellowish sliver of wood stained with blood sticking through his throat.

From the shadows of the hall, another man sprang into the room. In his hand was a gun. Beneath the low bill of his cap was a face such as none within the room had ever seen before. It was a face with cheek bones that belonged on a death's head. It was a face with flat nose, almond eyes, sunken yellow cheeks. It was a face that might have been some mad sculptor's conception of the personification of cruelty.

One of Monte's men pulled a gun. He had no chance to level it before a knife flashed like a lightning bolt and buried itself to the hilt in the man's gun arm. He dropped his gun, stared goggle-eyed at five more yellow-faced men who moved with silent swiftness into the room.

Monte Crespis stood up as one by

one his followers melted away from him, pressed back against the wall by the threatening guns and knives of the yellow men. Monte's lower jaw jutted defiantly.

"I told you guys," he said, addressing the yellow men collectively. "Told you and that guy who wears the fancy mask. Told you that I was damned if I was going to kick in with you. You may take my tip and get out of town before Murdo opens up on you. You can't—"

Monte stopped. He swallowed, and it was as though he had swallowed his glib tongue. The leader of the yellow men, a massive man with dangling, clawlike hands, advanced toward Monte. The yellow man's face was slit by a diabolical grin. In his eyes burned a strange, fanatical gleam.

Monte backed a step, bumped into his chair, sat down involuntarily. He slid out of his chair, his eyes never leaving the yellow man's cruel face. He kept going backwards. The yellow giant advanced, his arms drawing up, his claws clenching.

Monte bumped the wall. He stood still. Then he seemed to recall for the first time that he carried a gun under his coat. His right hand flashed upward toward his shoulder and was snared by a yellow claw that had the strength of steel in its grasp. A second yellow hand disarmed him, flung the gun aside, then leaped to Monte's red hair.

At the same moment the yellow devil's hand darted beneath his coat, produced a compact roll of white cloth which rippled down to Monte's feet. Monte, his head jerked forward, his eyes on the floor, watched the mound of white cloth with glassy eyes that were perhaps keen enough to inform his terrified mind that here was his shroud.

THEN with incredible swiftness it happened—that which froze the blood of every white man in the room, made cowards of these hardened crimesters. The yellow man who

held Monte without apparent effort, whipped out a fragile-looking sliver of bamboo from beneath his coat. The yellow man's knee came up, caught Monte in the middle, brought him groaning to his knees on the mound of white cloth.

The sliver of bamboo caressed Monte's neck, drew a thin, bloody line across the white flesh before its razor edge cut deep, severed blood vessels and cartilage, sawed with a circular motion that compassed the throat.

There was no cry from Monte—only a bubbling, liquid sound which escaped from the lip of the wound itself. Blood fountained. And then with one quick snap of the hand which held Monte's hair, the yellow man broke Monte's neck bones. The bamboo sliver cut cleanly through.

Hysterical cries of horror broke from the lips of Monte's companions. Heedless of the threatening guns about them, the men rushed from the room, falling over each other. In their minds was a single thought—to put as much distance between themselves and these silent, yellow killers as possible.

Within the room, the yellow murderer stepped over the body of Monte Crespis where it lay upon the white shroud. Blood blobbed from the severed neck. The yellow man held aloft the head with its hideously contorted face.

For a moment the yellow man's eyes flicked about the room, stopping finally on the ornate bridge lamp which stood behind Monte's chair. Then he strode majestically to the lamp, jerked off the shade. He jammed the severed head down on the sharp spear point of the lamp standard. He stepped back, turned to his companions for their approval. . . .

Agent X had visited the city frequently before, and had obtained files of information on the activities of the underworld. He knew there was a certain tavern and rooming house in the

east end where Murdo usually transacted business.

As X left the hotel door, a woman coming from the other end of the lobby fell into step beside him with apparent unintention. He gave her one of his sidelong glances, quick as the click of a camera shutter and as discerning as camera film itself.

The woman was startlingly beautiful. The dusky beauty of her face was accented by a gown of vivid scarlet. Curls of blue-black hair were carefully coiffured. She had a figure alluringly slender and she walked as though she expected to be looked at.

There was a single cab in front of the hotel. X made directly for it. As he put his hand on the handle of the door, a soft voice behind him said: "Taxi."

The driver of the cab sprang to the sidewalk, faced X squarely. "Sorry, sir, but the lady spoke first."

X turned, viewed the woman full in the face for the first time. The front view bore out all that he had anticipated from his glimpse of her profile. The nose, the mouth, the teeth were perfect. The eyes—there was something about the eyes. They were beautiful beneath their obliquely slanting brows. Beautiful eyes, yes—but there was something else.

"This," his mind muttered, "is the most dangerous woman I have ever met." Aloud, he said: "I beg your pardon. I did not know the cab was engaged."

She smiled. Her eyes passed appreciatively over his lean, square-shouldered figure. "Nor I," she said softly. "I did not engage the cab. Taxi service is intolerable in this city, don't you think? What direction were you going?"

"East," X answered.

"How fortunate. Why should we not share the cab?"

X held the door open for her. "Mine is the fortune," he said as he helped her in.

She paused while his hand was on her arm, looked back over her shoul-

der. "We will not argue, of course, but what with a kidnap attempted in the hotel this evening, I feel rather more secure having such capable company for at least part of the way, Mr. Martin."

Company for part of the way, she had said. Then she was determined that he should get out before she did. In other words, she was brazenly following him.

X GOT into the cab and found the woman occupying the center of the cushion. Her long-fingered hand pulled her scarlet dress back to make room for him beside her. X gave the driver an address that was a block away from his actual destination. Then he asked the woman how she had known his name.

"Was it black magic?" he asked.

She laughed. The gleam of her teeth sent an odd, cold sensation throughout his body. "I was in the hall when the Mongol prince said good-bye to you. I really was hiding behind the floor desk waiting to see the Mongol prince. Like all Americans, my curiosity where royalty is concerned is insatiable."

"And in exchange, oughtn't I have your name?" X asked.

She was searching for her bag on the seat beside her. As if by accident, her hand touched his. "I think," she said softly, "you may call me Erlika. Yes, I think I would like you to call me that."

"Miss Erlika?"

She laughed. "Only if you insist upon the 'Miss.' I am not married, if that's what you mean."

The taxi came to a stop in a dingy street bordered by old frame houses that had no common quality save the need of repairs.

"My corner, I believe," X said.

The woman extended her hand, and as he took it she grasped his fingers firmly and drew herself closer to him.

"The most dangerous woman in the world!" X's mind warned suddenly. Aloud, he said shortly: "Good-bye."

Erlika dropped back into the shadows of the cab. "But it is not goodbye," her soft lips murmured.

X closed the door of the cab, went behind it, and crossed the street at a brisk pace without looking back. He did not look back until he was well concealed in the shadows of the porch of a house he had no intention of entering. Then he saw the cab stop at the next corner east, and the woman who called herself Erlika got out.

X chuckled. She would need bloodhounds to follow him! He vaulted the rail of the porch, cut north between houses, crossed an alley, another lot, and came to his destination.

It was a two-story building, squared off at the top with a false front. The glass of door and window were painted red with the words: "BEER—WHISKY." There was no illumination in front except that which managed to pass through these painted signs.

Silence greeted the Agent as he pushed open the door of the tavern. The front door opened directly upon the barroom. There was the bar without a keeper. There were half a dozen round-topped tables and they were without customers. At the back of the room, cones of light burned down on a pair of pool tables, but there were no players.

The Agent's footsteps pounded hollowly on the bare floorboards as he marched toward the back of the room. He moved with more caution than his steps indicated. A noisy brawl-house like this doesn't empty itself without reason. Something had happened.

He stopped a few feet from the nearest pool table. Something had happened, all right. A man's trouser-clad legs were visible beneath the pool table.

X walked to the table, stooped, reached beneath to seize one of the ankles, dragged the man out. He was a man in his twenties, long-legged, thin, round-shouldered. He had pink, waxy-looking skin that showed blue veins at his temples. His face was a

triangle widened by a mop of tow-colored hair at the top and narrowing to a sharply pointed chin. Above the sensuous lips, he had a mustache that looked like corn silk and added years to his boyish face.

The blond man opened one blood-shot eye. "Go 'way," he said. "I'm dead."

"Dead drunk, you're right," X said. He slapped the man's thin cheek and got him to open both eyes. "Where's Murdo?" he asked.

The drunk rolled his eyes back and pointed with them toward the back of the room. "Mur's upshtairs." He turned over and pillowed his head on his left arm.

X stood up. "Skin-full, did you say Murdo or murder?"

There was no answer from the blond man on the floor. X started for the door at the back of the room. He opened the door carefully. Beyond was a stairway swallowed by blackness five steps up. X went up the five steps, then six. Blackness matted against his eyeballs like tar. Yet something warned him not to show a light. Then that happened which proved that had he not heeded that warning, he would not have lived.

HIS GROPING hand encountered a blade of steel in the darkness—steel that was slippery with *something*. X sprang backwards.

At the same time a flying body struck him full in the chest. His spine bowed backward from the impact. Long, lean arms gripped him around the waist. Weight threw him off balance, but as he fell, he pivoted half-way around on the ball of one foot so that he took the shock of the fall on his right side. The edge of the stair-tread gouged into his ribs, knocked breath out of him.

He heard the clatter of knife steel on the steps. Fingers he could not see hooked into his throat. X punched savagely into a face. A head snapped back with an audible crack beneath his blow. The strangle hold on his

throat was broken. He tried to screw his legs around to get his body on the level of one of the steps so that he could sit up.

In his twisted position the vital function of breathing seemed impossible. But as he turned, his opponent caught him by the ankles, jammed on his legs, doubled his knees to his chest, shoved, sent him rolling down the steps.

The back of X's head thumped against the lowest step. The force of the blow dashed the blood-red rain of pending oblivion across his eyes. He ground his teeth as though his jaws had the power to cling to his senses. He blinked, rolled over, got dizzily to his feet. Somewhere within the building a high-pitched voice shouted: "*Toug ia glachako!*"

A coldness born within him by that wild, barbaric cry shocked him to his senses. He saw clearly now the empty taproom, the open door through which his assailant had passed into the night. He turned to the dark stairway and bounded up its length. His flashlight beam pointed out a door, open, and about four feet from the top of the stair.

He walked to the door, but no farther. For immeasurable long moments, he stood there, unable to move, held by the hand of horror. For within the room, only a short time before, had occurred the most damnable, barbaric ritual the world has ever known.

CHAPTER III

SHROUDS OF THE YEZIDEE



SEVEN BLOCKS away from the tavern where Agent X had expected to meet Art Murdo, was a basement room beneath a barber shop. The door

of this basement room burst open and five men tumbled over each other in getting in. Their fingers fumbled

frantically clamping the three iron bolts into place, securing the door of their hideout.

Worn out, breathless, they melted down upon old chairs and boxes. They looked silently at each other and saw the paleness of their faces.

One of them, a paunchy man with a broken nose and flop ears, dug his fingers into his belly and groaned. "Wot they did to poor Monte is 'ard to stomick. The bloody 'eathen!"

"What they did to Monte is all right for you to worry about, Cock," said another man who was nursing a knife wound in his shoulder. "It's what might have happened to *me* that's worrying me."

Another little man who sat on an empty beer case and shivered, said: "Chinks. Where'd the chinks in this town get nerve enough to blow in on a high-class outfit like Monte's? And what's the idea behind it?"

The paunchy man nodded. "Wot's behind it? You've it there. If this was Lon'on, and some of the bloody brawls on Ropemaker Street, there'd be a point—just 'eathen against the whites."

"They ain't Chinks," said another. "I've seen a lot of Chinks, and these yellow devils ain't Chinks. Cock about had it right when he said they were heathens. Like Tartars, they are, sort of."

"What they are," said the fifth man, "don't make a whole lot of difference. The main thing is they're here and they finished Monte. They'd have nailed us to the wall with their knives if we hadn't iammed when we did. The question is, what are we going to do without Monte? Monte planned that pay roll heist. We got our instructions. Can we go through with it without Monte? Or do we go to Art Murdo and tell him his pal Monte has been put on the spot? Monte paid a per cent of his heist jobs to Art Murdo and Murdo thought up ways to keep Monte and us out of trouble."

"We been payin' Art for protection,

ain't we?" asked the wounded mah. "Then shouldn't we go to Art and get that protection?"

No one answered the wounded man's question, for at that moment there was a knock at the door—a gentle, ghostly sort of tapping.

The five men looked at each other, mouths open and silent. The tapping came again.

"It ain't cops," one whispered.

"No, it ain't," said another.

"'Oo's to know 'ow the 'eathen knocks?" asked the paunchy man.

"You take a peek, Cock," one suggested. "That little panel at the top of the door."

Cock moistened his lips, fidgeted. "And get a slug in me peeper?"

The wounded man cursed. "I'll take a look." He stuffed a bloody handkerchief in under his shirt, got up, went to the door and slid back the panel. He turned from the peephole to his anxious companions. "It's a dame," he said. "And a looker, too. What you suppose she wants?"

"I could do nicely with a dame right now," one said. "Why don't you ask her what she wants?"

The wounded man turned to the peephole. "What you want?" he asked.

"Oh, I would like so much to come in and talk a little," a soft voice said. "You are not afraid of me, are you?"

"Let her in," somebody whispered.

The wounded man started manipulating the bolts. "She'll knock your eyes out, boys. Evening dress and the whole works."

HE opened the door. There was a flash of scarlet from the darkness, and the woman called Erlika tripped into the room. She gave them a mocking curtsy, smiled her bewitching smile. Then she took a cigarette from the fingers of the little brown man on the beer case and put it to her lips. Her brown eyes covered each man's face, oblique eyebrows elevated.

"You like me, eh?" Erlika said. "I do not blame you. It is a very good

thing you do because I have some things to tell you that you will not like. First of all, with Monte Crespis gone, you will need a new leader. I have a new leader for you. You will go right ahead with the pay roll robbery Monte planned, but it will be executed a little differently."

"'Oo's this new leader?" Cock asked.

Erlika smiled mysteriously. "He is a very powerful man."

"Has he been okayed by Art Murdo?"

Erlika sneered. "Art Murdo is on his way—out!"

"You mean we're to kick in with a guy we've never seen?" asked the wounded man. "Baby, you're beautiful but dumb."

"You are half right," said Erlika. "And you are going to kick in, because if you don't—" She shrugged. "How would you like to be thrust through in a hundred places with bamboo slivers? Or perhaps you would prefer the water torture where we insert a bamboo tube into your throat and pour water down in your belly until you burst like a poisoned toad? Or perhaps you would like to be fed to the rats? You could watch them eat off your flesh. Would that be nice?"

Five frightened faces loomed palely in the gloom of the cellar. The wounded man pulled a gun. "How would you like to be ventilated, lady?" he asked.

Erlika laughed. "I would not like it at all. I would bleed and that would be unpleasant. If you will look around, I think that you will agree that to shoot me would not be the thing to do at all."

The five men turned like five puppets operated by a single wire. The trapdoor in the ceiling of the basement room was open. Light passing down from above fell upon six scarred, yellow, hideous faces with flat noses, high cheek bones, and cruel slots of eyes.

"The 'eathens!" breathed Cock.

Knives flashed into the hands of the six Mongols.

The wounded man tossed down his gun. "Okay," he said. "We kick in, miss."

ONCE before Agent X had heard the Mongol battle cry, "*Toug ia glachako*." He had learned then what it meant, but never before had he witnessed the hideous result of the *iagla michi*, as the ceremony was called by the nomad Mongols.

He knew as he stood in the doorway of that room above the tavern, that he had to deal with the most barbaric religious organization in the world—the Mongolian Yezidee. Devil worshipers they were, serving the Asiatic equivalent of Satan, Erlik. Their creed was the annihilation of civilization, for it was written in their religion that they should some day overrun the earth, conquering with cruelty, creating rivers of blood from white men's bodies.

X knew that the Yezidee, like the similar cult, the Hassanis, which flourished to the south of Black China, used the drug *hashish* in all its forms. He knew that this drug created not only a fiendish desire to kill, but an oblivion of pain and fatigue. A Yezidee might be dying, yet still he would fight while a drop of blood remained in his body.

How such a cult had become rooted in the United States, he could only guess, but he knew that if the human beasts were permitted to multiply, to teach their creed to the American underworld, his nation faced its greatest danger since the World War. It was incredible, but the Yezidee had come to America. Directly before his eyes was mute testimony of the horrible fact—the ceremony of *iagla michi*.*

The body of Mr. Monte Crespis, dude gunman who had planned a dozen successful bank and pay roll

robberies, was in that room. It lay across a pure white cloth, and its headless neck pooled blood onto the worn floorboards. The head of Monte Crespis was planted firmly on the spiked top of a metal floor lamp from which the shade had been removed. Ritual of the Yezidee prescribed that the head of the enemy should be mounted on a lance, and the lamp standard had offered an excellent substitute.

Wisps of red hair had been torn from Crespis' head and were tied in little knots at intervals along the lamp upright. Between these knots of hair were smears of blood. Only then had the Yezidee uttered the cry that had chilled X to the marrow: "*Toug ia glachako*—the battle standard is anointed."

For a time X stood there puzzled over the presence of the white cloth beneath Monte Crespis' body. And then it occurred to him that the cloth might well be intended for a shroud. The Yezidee thoughtfully provided shrouds for their intended victims. As the knights of old threw down their gauntlets to challenge an enemy, so the Yezidee threw down their shrouds as an unpleasant announcement that they were about to kill.*

The Agent's course was clearly set before him. Monte Crespis was in all probability one of the human tentacles of the criminal octopus, Art Murdo. If these Yezidee assassins had murdered Crespis, it was logical to assume that they would next turn on Art Murdo. With that in mind, X went down the stairs, into the tavern.

THE BLOND-MUSTACHED young man appeared suddenly crawling on hands and knees from beneath one of the round tables in the taproom. He had a heavy automatic in his right hand, and as X approached he sat back on his heels,

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Iagla michi*, the ceremony of anointing the Mongolian *teng*, or battle standard.

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: It is part of the Yezidee religion that none of their cult can expect to journey into the world of hereafter without having a suitable shroud. For that reason, since every Yezidee fully expects to die at any time, these Mongols carry their shrouds with them at all times.

raised the gun to eye level, and pointed it uncertainly at X.

X took a quick step forward like a football player attempting a drop kick. His right foot shot out, the toe of his shoe kicking the automatic out of the drunk's hand. The drunk looked dully with squinting blue eyes at his empty hand. "Pop," he said. Then he shrugged and lay down flat on the floor.

X seized the young man by the shoulders, hauled him to unsteady feet. He slapped the lean cheek of the pale, triangular face.

The tow-head shook his head and blinked. "Don't," he said. "I'm dead."

X forced the man into a chair, propped him up with one hand while with his other he removed his pocket medical kit. From this he removed a loaded hypodermic needle containing a powerful, but harmless, stimulant containing caffeine. He bared the man's arm, made the injection.

"You'll feel better," X said gently.

The man felt better almost at once, for he stooped, scooped his gun from the floor. He would have brought it into an excellent position to drill X through the middle had not X seized his wrist and given it such a twist that the man dropped the gun.

"Pain, too, clears the head," X said. "Now, what's your name?"

The man ran fingers through his mop of pale hair. "I'm Whitey, because my hair is like that."

"You're Whitey," X said, "and you're the sort who can lie his way out of almost anything. Make another try for that gun and your name will appear on a nice piece of granite."

He took from his medical kit a piece of rubber that looked like part of an auto inner tube. To this rubber was attached a pump and a small meter. This was actually a physician's device for checking on a patient's blood pressure, but Agent X used it for quite another purpose.

He wrapped the tube around Whitey's arm, made it tight by

pumping air into it. Then he kept his eye on the indicator of the instrument. The device became a lie detector of the most elementary sort, for untruths would be immediately indicated by a jump in blood pressure.

"Now, Whitey, who do you work for?"

Whitey gave X a dead-pan look. "Metro-Goldwyn—and the other guy. I'm stand-in for Mickey Mouse."

"You're a damned liar," X said mildly.

"Well, you don't need a lie detector for that," Whitey said sarcastically. "But that's the story I stick to."

X balled his fist and jabbed it at Whitey's mouth. Whitey's head snapped back. His blue eyes blinked. X said: "You work for Art Murdo."

"That's it — Metro-Goldwyn-Murdo," Whitey said. "What's the dingus say now?"

"It says your blood pressure will decline to zero if you don't come across. What happened here tonight? Were you in the room upstairs?"

Whitey made a face as though there was a bitter taste in his mouth. He shook his head. "I came here for a drink—"

"Which you had several times. Go on."

"Monte and the boys were upstairs, but I wasn't because I'm not in the mob. Crespis runs one end of Murdo's organization, but I hang around Murdo. I keep in the clear. After I'd had a few drinks, the yellow devils came in—six guys with faces that had been through a meat chopper, it looked like.

"They lit into the few of us guys that had been drinking and scared the pants off everybody but me. Me, I'm a hero. I crawled under a table and said I was dead. The yellow devils went upstairs and pretty soon hell broke loose up there and Monte's mob came tearing down the stairway. There was some yelling, so I went to sleep."

"All right," X said. "Now take me to Art Murdo."

Whitey blinked. "You wanta die?"

"Do you?" asked X coldly. "If not, take me to Murdo."

CHAPTER IV

SHROUD FOR AGENT X



THE CAB came to a stop in front of a swanky ten-story apartment building. Agent X had a gun in his pocket and this he kept pressed against

Whitey. He nudged the young criminal to precede him from the cab, then followed closely.

"You can turn that heater another way, pal," Whitey said. "I'm enjoyin' this a lot, because I can see you stretched out in the gutter with a lot of cops standing around talking about the angle at which the bullet entered your peritoneum."

X, however, remained close to Whitey, the bulge of his right coat pocket pressing against the crook's side. They entered the building, crossed a lobby that was cool, dimly lighted, and softly carpeted. An elevator that moved without sound took them to the second floor.

Whitey indicated a door marked B2. X told Whitey to knock. So perfectly was the place sound-proofed that what sounded from the hall like a mumble of voices became the noise of an uproarious party when the door was opened by a tall servant.

"This guy wants to see the chief, Fish-face," Whitey said.

"In private," X said.

They were admitted into a small hall from which they could see half a dozen couples in the living room, drinking, dancing, necking. Only one man in the group looked like criminal stock. The others were of the sort pigeon-holed as "influentials"—men it was well for Art Murdo to be

friends with. The girls looked like the usual run of bar-fly femininity.

The servant appeared a moment later, went to a door in the south wall of the hall and unlocked it. He held the door open for Whitey and X to enter. He closed, but did not lock it behind them. They were in a small library with a single window which looked out on the parking ground back of the building.

Art Murdo had one hip on his walnut desk. He was a long-legged man, heavy across the chest and shoulders. His dark brown hair was brushed close to his well-shaped head. A few gray hairs salted his temples. A small lump above each eyebrow looked like devil's horns on the point of sprouting.

There was about him a certain attitude that placed him apart from the general run of men. It was something that was difficult to define, something that indicated that dinner clothes were the natural habitat of such a body. This attitude was perhaps the reason he was frequently referred to as the Magnificent Murdo.

"Guy wants to see you," Whitey said. He walked straight to the desk with X close beside him, reached coolly into the desk drawer, then swung around fast.

His left hand grabbed at X's pocket, twisting the barrel of the gun it contained to one side and at the same time drawing a gun out of Murdo's drawer. Whitey did all this with such smoothness and without any apparent thought for himself, that X was almost taken by surprise. X jabbed a short, straight left to the point of Whitey's chin.

Whitey reeled into the desk, bowed backwards across it under the force of the blow. He fired one wild shot and probably never knew that it drilled harmlessly into the wall of the building, for he rolled off the desk to heap at the Agent's feet, unconscious.

X pulled the gun from his pocket, pointed it at Murdo and pulled the trigger. The top of the gun flew up,

revealing a package of cigarettes. He extended the smokes toward Murdo.

"Have one. But when Whitey comes around don't tell him about this. I've been bluffing him for half an hour with that trick cigarette case."

Murdo grinned. He had a pleasant smile in spite of his undershot lower lip. He accepted one of the Agent's cigarettes, put it in his lips and lighted it. "Your name's Martin, isn't it?" he asked. "A newspaper man?"

X nodded. "I've been here before. Having a shindig?"

Murdo shook his head. "Just a few of the boys who would like to be in the city hall next November. They won't get in, but I thought I might just as well get right with them—just in case. Sit down, Martin."

X chuckled. "You'd better sit down," he said cryptically. "I'd rather fall out of a chair than off a desk."

Murdo looked puzzled. He sat down in his chair, took another drag on the cigarette. "I don't get it," he said. "What's the joke?"

"You'll get it eventually," X said. "And please don't blow that smoke in my direction. It's drugged."

"Drugged?" Murdo looked at the cigarette and hurriedly stamped it out in an ash tray.

"Yes. That's why I carry them in a gun. They're almost as capable of putting a man temporarily out of the way as a gun."

MMURDO tried to get to his feet. He seized the edge of the desk, dragged himself half out of the chair. He was breathing in shallow gasps. His eyelids seemed to have weights attached to them.

"Damn you, Martin," he choked out. "Damn you!" Then he keeled over to the floor.

X stepped to the door of the room, opened it, saw no one in the hall. He removed the key from the lock, closed the door, locked it from the inside. He went over to Whitey, made sure that the tow-headed crimster was out for

several minutes to come. Then he propped Murdo back into the chair, stood studying the man's face for a few minutes.

"Your name is Martin, isn't it. A newspaper man?" The exact words Murdo had spoken a minute or two ago now came from the lips of Agent X, but in a perfect imitation of Murdo's voice. The intonation, inflection, even that certain slovenliness with which Murdo pronounced his words were exactly counterfeited.

X quickly removed his coat, withdrew a flat, leather-bound case. When opened, this revealed a triple folding mirror, tubes of makeup material, pigments, pomades, flexible metal plates which could be used as the foundation for such characteristic irregularities of physiognomy as the hornlike bumps above Murdo's eyebrows.

Seated at the desk, the mirror in front of him, the living model of the man he was going to impersonate on the opposite side of the desk, the fingers of Agent X worked like those of a skilled sculptor. The commonplace features that identified him as A. J. Martin vanished. His nose became larger. The little bumps above his eyebrows formed. Plates and plastic plumped his cheeks.

Lastly, he removed the sandy colored toupee he wore, revealing his own naturally brown hair. He slicked down the waves of his hair with brown pomade. White pomade added the touch of silver to his temples.

As a final touch, he changed clothes with Murdo. The racket king's evening clothes were a little too loose, for Murdo had some superfluous flesh on his otherwise fine figure. This difference was easily remedied by pneumatic pads placed beneath the clothes.

When he was satisfied with his own makeup, he stooped over Murdo, altered the racketeer's face until it closely resembled the face X had recently worn as Martin.

That attended to, he gave Murdo a hypodermic injection that would be

effective long after the drug in the cigarette had worn off. And then he was ready to revive Whitey.

The lean, tough, blond gunman came out of it blinking blue eyes, rubbing his chin. Then he sat up, brushed his tow-colored mustache, looked from X to Murdo. To his eyes the positions of the two men must have been exactly reversed—Martin unconscious in the chair and Murdo standing beside him.

"He packs a wallop, chief," Whitey said. "What'd you hit him with?"

X rubbed his knuckles. "My fist," he said, in imitation of Murdo's voice. "We got to get him out of here. He's a big shot newspaper guy. Nosey, but not a bad guy to keep on the good side of."

"So," Whitey said, getting to his feet, "you knocked him out. That should help get on the good side of him, that should. What do we do with him?"

"Go out and tell Fish-face to run the guests out. Then we'll take Martin back to his hotel just as though he had had too many drinks."

As soon as Whitey was gone, X made a quick search of Murdo's desk. The racket king was too cautious to have anything incriminating in his apartment. X looked in the waste basket where he found what had started out to be a letter to somebody addressed as "Dearest Edna." That information might be helpful.

Then he picked up Murdo's gun which Whitey had borrowed for the purpose of polishing off Agent X. It was a serviceable .38 loaded, and X put it into his pocket. There was no room in Murdo's evening suit for X's elaborate makeup kit, so he took several items from it and dropped them into his pocket.

Other devices which he frequently employed, he removed from the coat which the unconscious Murdo was now wearing. These, with the makeup kit, he wrapped in a sheet of paper, intending to replace them in the room

he had engaged at the hotel in the name of Martin. Murdo's keys and wallet passed into X's pocket.

WHITEY returned to announce that the guests had been tactfully got rid of. Together they raised the limp form of Murdo, whom Whitey supposed to be Martin, and dragged him from the apartment to the elevator, then out through the lobby of the building and into the waiting cab.

As they rode toward the hotel, Whitey said: "I don't think you can count on a per cent from that pay roll job you laid out for Monte Crespis. I think something happened to Crespis. This guy Martin could tell you." And Whitey related what he had already told X about what had gone on at the tavern.

"Yellow men, eh?" X said, as though all this was news to him.

Whitey shuddered. "Yellow and hopped to the eyes. Like chinks, only not chinks. I don't know what happened to Monte's mob. They're probably still on the run."

X remained silent until they reached the hotel, where he and Whitey got out with the unconscious man between them. They entered the hotel, all eyes turned upon them, and approached the desk. The clerk bowed to the Magnificent Murdo.

X said, in Murdo's voice: "My friend Martin has had a drop too much. We'll take him on up to his room if you'll give us the key."

The clerk passed the key to a bellhop who accompanied them up to the rooms X had engaged. There X installed Murdo, locked his bundle of makeup material and other devices in his bag, and once again joined Whitey.

"I think, if you can spare a bed, I'll bunk with you tonight, chief. My old lady's plenty sore. She found out today that I been working with you instead of that job I was supposed to have for the past two years."

X looked at the blond-mustached man. The kid had a mother. Well, he

SAX

supposed even gunmen had mothers. That didn't make it any easier for him to see that these criminals were brought to justice. He said: "And the old lady don't like the idea?"

Whitey laughed. "Not much. I was supposed to go to college and be a doc. Can you feature it?"

X forced a laugh. "Stick with me, kid, and some day you'll be able to buy your mom anything she wants."

"Tell her that!" Whitey scoffed.

They reached the apartment, and X showed Whitey to one of Murdo's three bedrooms. Then he went into Murdo's library and sat down at the desk.

He had not been seated more than a minute before there was a tap at his door. X's hand drifted down toward his pocket. He said: "Come in."

It was the butler whom Whitey had christened Fish-face. "There's a lady outside to see you, sir," he announced.

"Is there?" X asked disinterestedly. "What's she look like?"

"It's an old lady, sir. Mrs. Fauvre, she says her name is."

X nodded, though he hadn't the slightest idea who Mrs. Fauvre was. "Show her in."

The woman who entered must have been over sixty years of age. Her gray hair hung in strings from beneath her black straw bonnet. Her face was deeply lined, her eyes a moist blue, her hands crooked and hard-worked.

X stood up. "Won't you sit down?"

"No," said the woman in a scratchy voice. "Not in the same room with you. It should be poison to breathe the same air as you, you filthy beast."

X raised an eyebrow, took all this in Murdo's characteristic superior manner. "You're not very complimentary, mother."

"Mother! I'm not your mother, thank heaven! But I am a mother—somebody's mother. I can't forget that." Her voice broke, but she had it under control again. She kept shuffling toward Agent X, and her weak blue eyes gained new potency.

"I've come for my son. You're the

man who's responsible for all his bad ways. I'm taking him away from here, you understand? I'll not let him associate with the likes of you. It's you that taught him to drink, and—"

X held up one hand. "Please. Who is your son?"

THE WOMAN eyed him sharply. "I'm Mrs. Fauvre. I want my Delmar back. You took him away and you can give him back. He's got the makings of a fine, upstanding man in him if you haven't taken all that away."

"Your son has very light hair, a small mustache?" X asked.

"Of course. Where is he? I'm taking him home."

X pressed a button on Murdo's desk. The servant appeared in the door. X said: "Tell Whitey to come here a moment."

At the sound of Whitey's footsteps in the hall, the old woman's lips quivered. "My boy," she whispered beneath her breath. "My poor lost lamb."

Whitey stepped over the threshold, stopped, looked at his mother. The pink went out of his face. "Why, mom," he said gently.

The old lady went to him, arms outstretched. Whitey looked embarrassedly at X, lowered his eyes.

"Son, I've come for you. You've got to go home."

"No, mom," Whitey said. He yielded slightly to his mother's embrace. "Mr. Murdo's my boss. I'm working for him. It's honest work."

"Honest work!" The woman turned on X. "Art Murdo never did an honest day's work in his life. Men who associate with him don't do honest work. He'll use you, son, until he's through with you. Then he'll find a way of getting rid of you."

"You don't get it, mom," Whitey said.

"Oh, I get it. Murdo has told you you'll make a million dollars some day. Money got that way isn't any good, son. You're going home with me."

X shrugged, looked at Whitey. "It's up to you, Whitey. You can quit now if you'd like."

Whitey's sharp chin jutted. "I'm sticking with you, chief."

The old lady's shoulders wilted. She turned without a word toward the door and tottered out. Her shoulders shook with sobs no one heard. On the face of Agent X was an expression of profound sympathy, utterly out of keeping with the hard features of Murdo. This expression changed quickly as Whitey looked toward him.

"Mind if I see the old lady home?" Whitey said.

X shrugged. "Go right ahead. Be back though. I may need you."

Whitey left in an embarrassed hurry. X looked at his watch. It was after midnight. The servant came to the door. "The guards have come, Mr. Murdo. May I leave now?"

X nodded. Guards? What kind of guards? He waited until the servant was gone, then he went to the hall door and looked out. A thug-faced man in a checkered cap was lounging in front of the door. He touched his cap. "Hi, Mr. Murdo."

"Hi," said X. He closed the door. He went to the rear of the apartment which opened on a porch. There were two men out there, their coat fronts bulging. Art Murdo took no chances.

But Agent X did not know that there was one more watchman, a hard-jawed ex-burglar who had given up his profession to become the keeper of keys in Art Murdo's modern castle. His position was at a door at the end of the hall—a door which was cleverly lined with steel and fitted with a lock of his own design.

The key was a small, flat piece of metal with wards of unusual design. He kept it in his pocket, and his big, puffy right hand on top of it. So even if he dozed in his chair, as he frequently did, no one could have possibly obtained that key by stealth.

And that night he dozed. It was something more than a doze, for he had taken on more than his usual ra-

tion of beer. He was aware that some one was approaching him, but it was impossible for him to shake off his drowsiness before that some one got close enough to drive the muzzle of an automatic into his chest.

The watchman opened his eyes, stared up into a face that was masked with a triangle of handkerchief.

"Give, quick," said a husky voice. "Give us the key to Murdo's flat and make it snappy."

The watchman's eyes strayed into the shadows beyond the masked man. There was another somber figure waiting in the background. The watchman said: "I ain't got the key, I ain't." Then lent some truth to his statement by shoving the narrow key through the worn lining of his pocket and letting it go sliding down his pants leg.

The masked man ordered him to stand up. The watchman did as he was told, planting his right foot on top of the key which had fallen to the thick carpet from his trouser leg. The masked man gave him a quick frisk.

"Where's the key, damn it?" the masked man demanded.

The watchman raised plump shoulders. "I can't think where it is, I can't."

PUSHING the automatic against the watchman's spine, the masked man forced him out into a waiting car. There, a black sack was tossed over the watchman's head. A swift ride in the dark, direction and destination unknown. Then he was hustled from the car, stretched flat on his back on a wood floor, tied helplessly with ropes. And then the sack was removed.

He had swift visions of the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; a brazen statue of monstrous form, leering down at him; tall, lean men with yellow faces more inhuman than that of the brass image; and then a man who had no face at all except a grotesquely hideous mask of gold.

"The key. Tell me where the key is," came a muffled voice from behind the metal mask. "You know where the key is. Tell me."

The watchman tried to speak, gagged on the words. He shook his head. Terror of these exotic surroundings and strange people possessed him, but loyalty to Murdo was not easily shaken.

The masked man bent low. "The key, you fool. Have you any idea how long a time we can take to kill you? Have you any conception of the torment of which we are capable?"

Again the watchman shook his head.

The masked man turned. "Bring," he said, "the hungry one."

The watchman closed his eyes. His mind prayed and blasphemed. And when he opened his eyes again, it was to see yellow fingers cutting away the front of his shirt with a knife that tasted blood twice in the process.

"Good!" the watchman heard a woman's voice say. "The smell will tempt the appetite of the hungry one."

The watchman saw one of the yellow men approach him bearing a large coconut husk. Another carried a strange ventilated box from which came sharp, animal squeaks. He would have cried out then against the torture that threatened him had not his tongue actually stiffened with fear. He could utter only inarticulate sounds.

Bending over him, the yellow man dumped the squeaking contents of the box into the coconut husk and then clapped the husk to the watchman's naked chest.

"A Burmese rat," the masked man whispered. "A rat that has been on a fast. He is hungry, my friend. Now where is the key?"

Little feet scampered over the watchman's chest, driving him mad with their tiny, scratching claws. A cold snout sniffed at his blood. Then needlelike teeth sank deep.



Knife upraised, a man sprang into the room.

The watchman uttered a wail of agony and lapsed into unconsciousness. Icy water drenched his face. He

came to, sobbing: "The rat! Take it away. Take it away."

"The key, you fool. Where is Murdo's key?" The masked man was bending over him, his golden face like that of some god who watched a human sacrifice with avid glances.

"The key," the watchman shrilled. "In the hall. On the rug. Dropped it—when— The rat! Take it away. It's eating. . . ."

Then blissfully another interval of unconsciousness.

The masked man turned to the woman. He said: "He must have pushed the key through his pocket. If it's in the hall, everything should be easy." He gestured to one of the Mongols. "Take the rat away."

The Mongol grinned, uttered something in a guttural tongue. The masked man looked at the woman. She translated swiftly: "He says let the poor beast feed. There is no better food for it. . . ."

X returned to the library, started a pedestal fan, took off his coat. He was restless. In the stifling heat, the unaccustomed quiet, lurked an unknown quantity that prodded that intuition of his. The air breathed danger.

There was a scratching on the window screen. X sprang toward the window, remembered that his gun was on the other side of the room in his coat. He backed toward the coat, his eyes on the window. Something tapped on the door. X turned to the door, and at that instant the window screen rattled, fell away, and a lithe, powerful man sprang into the room.

The man wore ragged Occidental garments, but they seemed strange to him. And no wonder! The yellow, scarred face, the flat nose, the high cheek bones proclaimed him a native of Mongolia. In his talonlike hand was a long-bladed knife.

X sprang toward his coat, but something tugged at his trouser leg, *thucked* into the wall. The right leg of his trousers was pinned to the wall

with a Mongol's knife. And the cloth of Murdo's suit was strong stuff. The door of the library opened and another hideously yellow-faced man entered.

The new arrival held a gun in one hand and in the other a long white roll of cloth. X stooped, seized the hasp of the knife, pulled it from the wall. At that moment, the yellow Yezidee tossed one end of the roll of cloth at the Agent's feet.

Before X spread his shroud.

CHAPTER V

FOOD FOR RATS



BEFORE THE MONGOL had a chance to release the other end of the shroud, X seized the end of the cloth near his feet. He gave it a jerk that brought

the yellow man within reach of a nasty haymaker that the Mongol took on the shoulder. The yellow man rocked back, caught himself by seizing the back of a chair.

At the same time, his companion, who had entered through the window, thrust a three-joint length of hollow bamboo almost into the Agent's mouth and blew upon the other end of it. A vaporous something clouded from the end of the tube and was dragged into the Agent's lungs by his inhalation.

The vaporous stuff had the unmistakable odor of *hashish*. Its effect was almost immediate in spite of all the will that X exerted against it. The Agent felt as though red-hot spurs were biting into his flesh. He went mad, completely berserk. Under the insidious influence of the drug all the inhibitions of civilization dropped from him like discarded garments. He had one desire and that was to kill.

A knife thrust along his side passed unfelt. He was in a world of fog,

peopled only by hideous, scowling Mongol heads. He lashed out with fists and feet. He tore up chairs from the floor and hurled them at the yellow heads.

But for all the stimulation his normally Herculean strength had received, his fighting lacked direction and he had no defense. He never knew exactly when the blow that brought him down, was struck. There was simply an explosion in his brain and total darkness.

When they saw Agent X upon the floor the two Mongols went to the window of the library. There hung the rope by which one of them had gained entrance to the apartment. As soon as they had worked it loose from a hook above the window, they carried X and the rope into the living room, one end of which opened on the sun porch at the rear of the building.

On the porch lay the two bodyguards Murdo had employed. Both stretched out on the floor, narrow slivers of razor-edged bamboo thrust into their throats. They had bled to death soundlessly. The two Mongols exchanged a few guttural words, then, walking softly on green-soled shoes, they rounded the pools of blood on the porch floor, carrying X with them.*

One end of the rope they looped around the Agent's body, lowered him over the edge of the porch and into a waiting car in the parking lot below. They then slid down the rope, detached its grappling hook from the rail above when they had descended.

There was a man waiting beneath the steering wheel of the car. No sooner had the Mongols joined the unconscious Agent X than they sped across the lot into the alley.

But a pair of horrified eyes had watched all this from the shadows.

And as the Mongol's car moved off, the slim figure of a girl darted across the lot, climbed into Art Murdo's flashy roadster.

THE AGENT'S first sensation was that of being hurled through empty space. Cold empty darkness was all about him, and there was a sickness in his stomach such as an aviator, power diving from the sky, might feel.

Then there was the dawn of light, a graying of the blackness, and the nausea passed. He sat up, looked dazedly about him. He might have been transported by magic to secret Asia. A smoky, yellow light coming from a brass-screened storm lantern of ancient design illuminated the room. Directly in front of him and back against the wall was a hideous, crouching demon, fashioned in brass and gaudily painted. Cruelty was cast into its metal face.

On each side of the brass god stood three tall, sinewy Mongols clad in white, tunic-like garments of silk. Their shaved heads were covered by peaked white caps around which scarlet silk was wound, turban fashion. The Mongols were as motionless as the hideous image they guarded.

X turned his head. On the other side of the room a white man was stretched on the floor, his torso stripped of all clothing. To all appearances the man was dead, or blissfully unconscious. His hands and feet were roped to rings in the floor. A half of a huge coconut husk rested on his chest, and from beneath the husk came greedy, squeaking sounds. Cold chills wound around the Agent's spine like serpents. He had heard of such things, but he had never expected to see them.

X got to his feet. His powers of recuperation were truly remarkable. There was a slight pain in his head and a sensation of dizziness. Aside from that, he felt fit for anything—anything except *that*, as his eyes re-

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: The Mongolian Yesidee, to show his contempt for the religion of the Moslems, wears green, the color sacred to the Moslems, beneath his feet.

turned to the man on the floor, to the coconut husk that retained the hungry, squealing thing.

A door opened. Through it came first a small, gray-haired man with brassy-looking spectacles. X recognized the man immediately as Morton Edgewood, the pottery dealer who had so strangely disappeared; for X had seen Edgewood's picture in the newspaper before he had left for Washington. There was an expression of utter despair in the pottery dealer's eyes.

Behind Edgewood came a man and a woman, arm in arm. The man was tall and lean. Very little else could be told about him, for his face was masked by a golden Yezidee devil mask, fully as leering and hideous as the face of the brass god guarded by the Mongols.

The woman—it was she who called herself Erlika. Erlika dressed in flaming yellow, her long, dark hair coiled upwards in two horns about a conical, pagoda-like cap of gold. Her lovely face was flushed. Her mouth smiled. In her eyes was an unholy animation, a gleam that softened immediately and became strangely alluring as her eyes fell upon Agent X. Resting in the girl's hand was a sort of scepter to which was attached a life-like image of a lizard, its tiny jaws open.

"Welcome to the temple of Erlik, Art Murdo," she said to the Agent, and then she stood aside for the man in the devil mask to approach X.

Said the man in a muffled voice: "Erlik has spared your life, Murdo, that you may serve him better alive than dead."

"Nice of Erlik," replied X lightly in the voice of Murdo.

"I think that we have sufficiently demonstrated our power tonight," went on the masked man. "Your bodyguards had their throats slit, since their blood was deemed unworthy to grease our *toug*. One of your guards, the man who is now dead or dying

on the floor, yielded keys to your apartment after he had been subjected to the torture with which you are doubtless acquainted. A hungry Burmese rat is imprisoned beneath the coconut shell, you see."

"That's a new one to me," X said calmly. "I must try it on some one some time. It would be more persuasive than burning the soles of the feet with cigarettes, I suppose."

"You were brought here for the purpose of urging you to join our cult," said the masked man. "We have a high regard for your abilities."

"Thank you," said X. "The only trouble is that when I join a lodge, I want to be head man right off. You'd have to let me have your devil mask and run the show. By the way, what does your organization do besides commit murder for the fun of it?"

"Blood is the food and drink of Erlik," said the masked man sternly.

"Erlik should be well fed," X commented. "But aside from feeding Erlik—"

"YEZIDEE are the rightful masters of the earth. It is written on top of the world that we shall annihilate civilization. This is but the beginning of things. We sow the seed which our followers shall reap. America is the logical place for our beginning.

"First of all, those who live outside the law, like you do, Murdo, shall be drawn into our folds. From them we shall gain new riches and capable followers. For months, perhaps years, citizens will go on living their lives, while within those dark corners where America's criminal element gathers, the cult of the Yezidee shall hold forth, controlling with its power the lives of government officials until the day when all America shall be ours.

"From the Eight Towers of Black China, the power of the Yezidee

shall stretch like tight strong arms to embrace the world. From Baga Nor—"

"Excuse me for interrupting the travelogue," X said, "but what was that about getting wealth from America's criminal element? Do you have the idea that I'm going to toss *my* take into your bank account to stretch a telegraph system like eight strong arms from the leaning tower of Pisa to the Lakehurst mooring mast or something? Brother, you and I aren't going to get along!"

"Do you mean that you refuse to join with us?"

"I think that you've got the idea," X said, lips smiling disdainfully. "Besides, you're nuts."

Erlika took swaying steps to the side of the masked one. "We have ways of persuading the unwilling. Look at Morton Edgewood. He would lay down his life for me, would you not, nice old man?"

Edgewood looked frightened. Erlika tapped his head gently with the lizard wand she carried. She laughed. "You are not going to be stubborn, Art Murdo?"

X smiled. "Lady, a beauty like you could probably get anything out of a man. But when you touch Art Murdo's bank account you're fooling with dynamite. I'm getting out of your temple and I'm coming back. And when I come back, I'll have the best choppers and rodmen in the country with me. You think you can take over this town after I've run it for years? Well, the whole world can join your crazy lodge if it wants to, but this town is mine!"

The masked man glanced at Erlika. She stepped swiftly toward X and extended the lizard wand toward the Agent's face.

But at that moment, the door of the room swung open. The silhouette of an automatic snouted into the room, spat orange-yellow flame. The screaming slug of lead smashed the lizard wand from Erlika's hand.

CHAPTER VI

MURDO'S GIRL



SELDOM, outside of the vortex of a cyclone, do things happen as quickly as they did in the Yezidee temple immediately following that mysterious shot that had saved X from he knew

not what. But what he could imagine.

First of all, there was the sudden and unaccountable presence of the person who had fired the shot. That red-haired, angel-faced person sprang lightly into the room, grinned at X, flung the gun she had used in X's general direction. X had to leap high and to one side to yank the gun out of the air. When he came down, it seemed one of the Mongols was almost under him, knife in hand.

X let the yellow man have the barrel of the gun across the side of the head with such force that the Mongol pivoted dizzily and struck the floor. X took a split-second to look around. Erlika was standing at the base of the brass devil god, eyes flashing, shouting out orders in Mongol dialect.

Two of the Mongols had closed in in front of their masked leader. Another Mongol was taking catlike bounds toward the red-haired girl. Two more were coming at X from different directions. Gray-haired Morton Edgewood, pale-faced with fear, was creeping behind the brass image of the devil god.

X had to make a quick choice. One of the Mongols was in an excellent position to knife him from the rear. But across the room, another had come to grips with the redheaded girl. X thought of himself last and delayed his move for self preservation long enough to shoot a leg out from under the yellow man who was trying to knife the redhead.

Instantly X dropped almost to all

fours in time to catch the Mongol who sprang from behind him, by means of a body-block which pitched the yellow man heels over head. Straightening, X met the flash of a knife in his face, seized a yellow wrist of his second attacker. He held off the knife, spilled the man over his extended leg.

The Agent sprang toward the two Mongols who seemed to be guarding the masked man. If he could but lay the leader by the heels the whole elaborate and deadly scheme of the cult might be defeated. The two Mongols parted suddenly before X's onrush.

His hand, cupping the gun, brushed the ear of one before he could check the blow and save his strength. Directly behind that point where X expected to find the masked leader, there was a closed door. Then he heard the redhead's frantic cry: "Art!"

He turned, dashed across the room to where one of the yellow men had the redheaded girl by the throat. X socked the Mongol at the base of the brain with his clenched fist. The man went down, still clinging to the girl's throat with the relentless grip of the jaws of a bulldog. The redhead fell on top of him, and X had to hack the wrist of the Yezidee with his gun barrel until bones splintered, before he broke the hold.

Then he dragged the girl to her feet, shoved her toward the door. He darted a glance over his shoulder, saw two of the yellow men coming through another door. They were burdened with an antiquated machine gun which could nevertheless make a man's body look like a sieve. There was a time to run and a time to fight.

This, X decided, was the time to run, inasmuch as he was fully responsible for this heroic and fascinating redheaded girl who had risked much to save him. He tried one more shot over his shoulder before pushing the girl through the door.

X slammed the door on the way out. The girl, who evidently remem-

bered perfectly the way she had come in, led right and left through a short hall, came to a door and flung it open. Ahead was the darkness of the night.

"The roadster," the girl cried. "Over there!" She pointed at a flashy car parked in the center of a rough and rolling lawn and about a hundred feet from the house.

The machine gun came to life, spat lead promiscuously. Mongols had gained the door and were firing with automatics. And then a head, an arm, and a gun thrust up over the edge of the rumble compartment of the roadster toward which they were running. The gun in the car streamed slivers of flame.

FOR AN INSTANT X thought they were caught between two fires. But glancing back, he saw the Mongols had ducked back within the door and were firing with more caution, though very little better aim. The person in the roadster rumble was covering their escape with a wild fusillade of bullets.

They gained the car. X shoved the redhead in and followed. The man in the rumble stood upright, yelled in a mushy voice: "How'zat, chief?" And then as X started the car forward, he nearly tumbled out.

"Whitey!" gasped the girl. "How did you get here?"

Whitey took the wind in his teeth, leaned forward so that his tow-colored head came between the Agent's and the girl's. "You brought me, toots, though damned if I knew anything about it until the fireworks began. Where in hell are we?"

Lights of the roadster had picked out a drive. X nosed the car into the drive, wheeled it around a curve that edged the corner of a dilapidated cemetery. To the south of the road, X saw the lights at the outskirts of the city.

"It was this way," Whitey was yelling in X's ear. "I had a drink or two on my way back to your place. I got to thinking it was too damned hot to

sleep indoors, so when I got to your place I just thought the rumble seat of this fire engine would make a better bed than a bed would. Next time I sleep outdoors, don't anybody wake me up like that again. Gives me the jitters."

X stole a glance at the girl beside him. With the wind streamlining her hair, his eyes caught a perfect profile against the moonlit horizon. A forehead with a babyish bulge, a saucy nose, rather large lips, a determined chin, the smooth curve of her bare throat. Was this, he wondered, "Dearest Edna"? Now was as good a time as any to find out.

"Edna—" he began.

"Yeah, what?" the girl answered.

"How come you happened along when you did?"

"Well, I tried to get over for the party, as I said I would, but dad had an emergency case out in the country and I had to go with him and help. So I was late getting to your apartment. Whom should I see but Art Murdo, the Magnificent, being lowered from his apartment on the end of a rope. I simply followed in your car. You told me I could use the roadster any time. And what was that crack you made once about a respectable doctor's daughter not making the kind of a gal for you?"

X smiled. "I'll have to take it back. You were wonderful."

She looked at him sharply, then bounced across the seat until she was as close to him as possible. "Where do you get that past tense, Art? I still am wonderful."

X put his arm across the girl's shoulders. Her head nestled against his chest. In the rumble seat, Whitey yawned. "Don't mind me, folks," the tow-head said.

It was queer—two kids drawn into crime by the magnetic personality of Art Murdo. One of them, the man, not amply supplied with wit, and what brain he had sodden with alcohol, would naturally have followed a stronger character than his own. It

was unfortunate he had chosen Murdo. And the girl, evidently a physician's daughter, enlightened, brilliant, brazen, deliberately seeking the searing flame that was Murdo, like the moth that dances into the candle flame.

Lips against the girl's hair, an expression of pity escaped X. "Poor kid!"

"Lucky girl," she sighed, and was very still for the rest of the short trip across town.

THERE WERE COPS in Murdo's apartment when X arrived—a couple of plainclothes men who addressed X as "Art" and wanted to talk with him in private. Whitey and Edna disappeared into another part of the apartment while X took the two dicks into the library.

"Now, what went on here tonight, Art?" asked one of the dicks, settling himself in a chair. "Folks heard the sounds of a row and investigated, found three of your men lying in their own blood, slivers of bamboo in their throats."

"I was kidnaped," X said.

"And you won't talk about it, like that Mongolian prince in the hotel, huh?"

"On the contrary, I don't mind telling you that I was kidnaped by Mongols. The same six Mongols, I believe, mentioned by the truck driver who was assassinated in the Edgewood pottery shop. Furthermore, I saw Edgewood himself. He seems to be the tool of this gang of cutthroats. I was taken to a house on the edge of town near an old cemetery. You can go there and raid the place, and about all you'll find is another of my men, dead, his body partially eaten by a Burmese rat; and possibly a big, brass idol too big to move."

"Are you kiddin' us?" asked the other detective.

"I was never more serious in my life," X said. "If you want me, you'll know where to find me." He stood up. "So long."

After the police had left, X sat in the library for some time, his mind occupied with what had taken place in the Yezidee temple that night. The six Mongols and the leader, plus Erlika's witchery, plus the knowledge of the use of the drug hashish in forms with which the Occidental scientists were unfamiliar, made a combination hard to beat. The savagery of the Yezidee and his philosophy of destruction presented for the first time a genuine danger to the western world.

The Agent's thoughts were interrupted by the sudden appearance of Edna, attired in a pair of Murdo's pajamas rolled up at the trouser cuffs and the sleeves. She sat down on the arm of the Agent's chair and fingered his hair.

"You don't mind if I stay here tonight? You see, dad will be out with his patient—"

"It looks very much as though I'll have to invite you to stay," X said, looking up into innocent blue eyes.

"Dad won't mind," she said. "He knows I can take care of myself."

"Your dad is a fool," X said coldly. And then, because she looked hurt, he took her hand, fingered an enormous diamond solitaire upon her third finger.

"I'd like a plain gold band to go with that," the girl said.

X laughed. "Drop into the jewelry store tomorrow and get one," he said, putting into the sentence a harshness that cut the girl deeply.

He knew precisely what he was doing and what Art Murdo had done. Murdo had begun his conquest in the guise of a gentleman, but X knew the man too well to suppose that he had any intention of carrying out any promises he had made the girl. So through his impersonation of Murdo, he wanted to make the girl see the ruthless racket king in his true colors.

The girl went to the door, a pitiful yet comical figure in the baggy pajamas. At the door, she turned half

around. X saw the glint of tears in her eyes. "You—you'd better get some rest," she said. "Good night."

"Good night," X mumbled. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. He heard the soft footsteps of the girl, felt her lips brush his timidly and tenderly. He did not open his eyes. But he did not sleep.

IT was at dawn that Agent X left Murdo's apartment, but not as Murdo. Though he wore Murdo's clothes, his face had once again become that of A. J. Martin. In this disguise he returned to the hotel and to his room where the real Murdo, disguised as Martin, still slept beneath the dose of drug that X had given him.

As soon after breakfast time as he thought fitting, X phoned the room of Djamok, the enlightened Mongol prince.

"Martin speaking," he announced. "I intend to have a talk with you. Shall I come in through the window or shall it be the door?"

Djamok laughed. "I being most happy to welcome you at the door," he said.

Two minutes later X was installed in a chair facing Djamok who cuddled his Scotch pipe. The prince listened politely as X related the happenings of the night before, keeping himself out of the picture entirely, and acting as though the adventure had happened to Art Murdo. When he had finished, Djamok asked:

"How do you know all this, eh?"

"Murdo told the police, and I have ways of getting information from the police," X said.

"I being familiar with Mongol Yezidee, I will tell you what I know," Djamok began. "First, understand, all Mongol not being Yezidee. This Erlika, she being but a symbol of Erlik's daughter. She being one of many white women chosen by the Yezidee, one white woman each generation, to serve as Erlika, goddess. She probably brought up from babyhood in

Yezidee temple and being taught unspeakable things and magic the Yezidee practice."

"I think I understand," X said. "Where do these white goddesses come from?"

"This one probably American baby traveling with parents in Asia," Djamok explained. "Otherwise, how she come back to America. You hearing of kidnappings of white travelers by Mongol bandits? When a new Erlika is needed, bandits search for new white baby girl to take old Erlika's place. She being brought up like goddess, eh? Erlika is Erlik's daughter—the devil's daughter, eh? She being brought up bad and learning things I not knowing about devil-magic."

"But the other Mongols—how could their entrance into this country be managed?"

There was a faraway look in Djamok's soft, intelligent eyes. "Many things I not knowing about Yezidee. Many things no man knowing—strange things. The Yezidee may sleep like death—what you call it?"

"Catalepsy?" X suggested.

"So. Artificial catalepsy, sleeping like dead. The Yezidee makes the effort. He willing himself to sleep like dead thing. In that state, he not being in need of food. He being like dead, he could be shipped on boat concealed in some box marked something else, eh."

"Could be shipped in a big urn, for instance," X said.

X thanked the Mongul prince for his information. It had been more than information he had been seeking. Djamok was an enigma, and X had sought to see behind the kindly, mild face of the yellow man. He had not succeeded.

Returning to his room, X once more assumed the disguise of Art Murdo. Choosing an opportune time, he went down the fire escape at the end of the corridor and walked briskly to a cab stand where he engaged a

taxi to take him back to Murdo's apartment.

The phone was ringing as he entered the apartment. X hurried into the library where he found Edna had picked up the phone. He took it from her hand, said hello in Murdo's voice.

A frightened, miserable old man's voice came over the phone: "This is Morton Edgewood speaking. Last night I heard you defy Erlika and her yellow devils, so I am calling you instead of the police. I escaped during the fighting. I am only hoping that my information may help you in ridding the country of these terrible people. I know you are a criminal, Mr. Murdo, but I know you have a selfish purpose in trying to get rid of Erlika and her devils."

"Yes. Go on," X urged impatiently.

"I dare not call the police. I am wanted for murder which I did not knowingly do. Erlika uses some drug which puffs from the mouth of that lizard-like thing to enslave men's minds. I was not conscious of what I was doing when I killed the truck driver in my shop. I want to clear my name before I die."

"Chin up," X snapped. "You're not going to die."

"There is no escape. Listen, while there is time. The Mongols have added to their gang a group of criminals once directed by a man by the name of Crespis. To-night at nine o'clock, an armored car bearing the pay roll for the Wayne Machine Company will be at the corner of Hurst and Salter Streets. As the car passes that corner there will be a holdup."

"It will be the most horrible thing of its kind in the history of crime, for if there is any resistance, not a man in the car nor any policemen or any bystanders will be permitted to live. The Mongols have hideous ways of killing, and they delight in bloodshed. And Mongols will direct whites in this crime. That is all."

"Wait. Where are you now?"

"I am hiding in the basement of a deserted garage on Orange—" From

the receiver of the phone at the Agent's ear came a cry of mortal terror.

X CLACKED the receiver back on its hook. He turned to Edna. "Where's Whitey?" he asked.

"He said he was going out and get tight because I didn't love him."

"He would, when I need him!" X snapped.

"Can't I help?" the girl asked eagerly.

"Yes. You can drive me to Orange Avenue in my car. I may need both hands to shoot with. Mongols again."

X searched the drawers of Murdo's desk, found an automatic, pocketed it. The girl had grabbed up her purse and was already running toward the door. X followed. Out in the parking space behind the building they got into Murdo's car, Edna at the wheel.

The girl knew how to drive fast and get away with it. Eight minutes later, X sighted the deserted garage on Orange Avenue. He said to the girl: "I'll get out here. You drive around the block and pick me up, say about five minutes later."

The girl looked at him, her lips set. "I will not!"

She braked the car to the curb and was out of it as soon as X was. The Agent led the way to the sliding doors of the garage, found them locked from the inside. The door of the garage office yielded after some coaxing, and X entered, flashlight in hand, Edna behind him.

The girl got hold of the tail of his coat, hampered his movement as he crossed the greasy concrete floor of the big building, now and then venturing a beam of light, searching for the entrance to the basement. When he found the basement entrance, it was somebody's old door set in the floor, the door knob replaced with a ring. A tiny string of light passed up through the keyhole of the door.

X dropped to his knees, took from his pocket a little rod that resembled a very lean lead pencil. It was actual-

ly a miniature periscope and very well adapted for the purpose to which he put it. He thrust the instrument through the keyhole and squinted in the end of it, turning the instrument slowly from right to left. What he saw caused a hoarse exclamation to explode from his lips.

He stood up. "Stay back, Edna. They've gone. They've left a souvenir you wouldn't want to see."

He opened the door and descended rickety steps. The basement was floored only with packed earth. A broom handle had been stuck in the floor to act as the wooden neck for the head of old Morton Edgewood. Wisps of gray hair had been tied to the wooden upright. Blood still dripped from torn blood vessels. The decapitated body had been thoughtfully provided with the white Yezi-dee shroud.

X turned from the revolting scene and hurried up the steps to rejoin Edna. The girl sought his arm in the darkness and squeezed it hysterically.

"No nerves, now," X said. "You get in the car and run back to the apartment."

"What for?" she demanded.

"Because somebody has to be there to answer the phone in case Whitey calls," X told her. He was expecting no call, but he had to have an excuse to get rid of the girl.

As soon as she was gone, X crouched in the darkness. He needed no light and no mirror other than his supersensitive fingers for reshaping his features and becoming once more Mr. A. J. Martin. He left the garage, walked up Orange Avenue until a street car bound for the center of the city came within sight. He boarded this and rode down within a couple of blocks of police headquarters.

As he left the car, he failed to notice a plump-faced man with flop ears get off behind him, follow him to the police station, even enter the corridor of the building.

At the desk, X demanded to see the

chief of police and was told that the chief was busy.

"He will see me, nevertheless," X said, "in regard to the whereabouts of Mr. Morton Edgewood, wanted for murder. I know the truth about Mr. Edgewood."

The desk sergeant got up and personally escorted X to the chief's office. The plump man with the lop ears walked calmly from the police station, saying to a cop at the door: "'Ow's the weather? 'Ot enough for you, I 'opes."

SEATED across from the chief of police, X quietly and calmly related all that Edgewood had told him over the phone concerning the pay roll robbery that was to take place that night. He also revealed the place where Edgewood's body might be found.

The chief listened gravely. "The pay roll robbery," he said finally, "won't be a success, thanks to you, Mr. Martin. We'll have men there to take the wind out of those yellow devils' sails."

X smiled slightly. "I do not think you will be troubled with the yellow devils. Your chief job is to take care of the remnant of Monte Crespis' gang." For X believed that before the time for the pay roll heist, he would be able to take care of the Mongols personally. . . .

The fat man with the lop ears entered a corner saloon some distance from police headquarters. The nickel in his fingers found the slot of a booth phone. He dialed a number, whispered his message and went out.

On the other side of the city, the shell-pink ears of Erlika received that message and she in turn employed a telephone.

"Beloved," she said in the transmitter, "Cock ran into the newspaper man, Martin, entirely by accident, though he claims to have been shadowing him. He followed Martin to the police station. Edgewood must have

been talking to Martin when our men found him, for Martin gave information concerning Edgewood to the police. Martin will have to die, you understand. And you will have to take care of the job yourself, because by the time Martin has returned to his hotel, we will need the Mongols for the proposed robbery.

"It will be absolutely safe for you to kill him. I have planned the murder so cleverly he cannot escape and you will be absolutely safe. Listen closely. . . ."

CHAPTER VII

SLEEPERS IN THE TOMB



ONE HOUR later, Agent X, again in the disguise of Art Murdo, crouched behind a tombstone in the old cemetery near the house at the edge of town in which he had been held a prisoner the night before.

He had already explored the house and had found it deserted, as he had expected. But the cemetery—six ferocious Mongols had to be kept somewhere. And if the Yezidee practiced artificial catalepsy, the death-like sleep, what better place to keep them than one of the three old stone vaults in the cemetery?

X had dressed in the darkest business suit he had been able to find in Murdo's extensive wardrobe. Beneath his suit coat, and attached to his belt, was a mysterious black box of metal. In spite of the heat of the night, X wore black leather gloves, the palms of which were covered with a strong metal mesh.

He had not long to wait until the pale moonlight showed the figure of a woman dressed in black, picking her way delicately among the old graves and approaching one of the vaults. The woman's face was nearly concealed by a hood of black pulled over her head. But there was no mistaking

that alluring figure. The woman was Erlika, child of Satan.

She stopped at the door of the vault and X heard her key grate in the ancient lock. There was a snarl of rusty hinges as she pushed back the heavy door and entered the world of the dead.

X sprang from his hiding place, hurried to the door of the tomb. He pressed gently upon the bronze panel with his gloved hands. Erlika had locked the door from the inside, and it would have taken the strength of six men to have battered in that door. Time and patience alone would accomplish an entrance.

X dropped to his knees, searching his pocket as he did so to procure one of the simplest and yet one of the most important tools which he carried—a needle-nosed *oustiti*.*

With breathless care, X inserted the tool in the lock, felt around until he could grasp the tip of Erlika's key. Holding the handles of the tool tightly, he turned it small fractions of an inch at a time. When he had turned the key completely around, he withdrew the tool with the same caution.

There was no possibility of opening the door quietly so he simply gave it a kick with his right shoe and stepped into the vault.

With a swift glance, X recorded the scene within the vault. Six of the crypts had been entered. Six old coffins had been removed. In the dark crypts moldering bones of the rightful owners of the coffins were nakedly exposed. The six coffins occupied the center of the floor. But in only one, enfolded on the soft dust of decayed cushions, lay a Mongol. The others were evidently away on some errand.

As X entered, Erlika straightened up from the coffin where the lone Mongol

lay in his cataleptic sleep. In her hand was a small glass vial. Her red lips peeled back from set white teeth in a snarl. Her eyes flashed. Yet even in her fury she was the most beautiful woman X had ever seen. It seemed incredible to find her here breaking the evil spell which she herself had probably induced upon her sleeping servant.

Erlika uttered a single guttural syllable, and the Mongol over whose coffin she had been stooping sprang to his feet, snatched a knife from his garments.

Agent X, legs wide-spread, empty-handed, waited for the yellow man's lunge.

THE MONGOL hurdled his coffin, knife upraised. The Agent's gloved fingers flexed and were patient. The yellow man, slightly surprised that X made no move to protect himself, paused a moment, then seized X's throat in one hand, drove down at X's upturned face with the knife.

Swiftly, surely, X's right hand shot upwards, closed upon the knife wrist of the Mongol. His left hand came up as far as his belly, touched a switch on the front of the black box strapped there. The Mongol took a writhing half turn to the right and collapsed on the floor, unconscious.

For a moment, the look of triumph on Erlika's face became one of bewilderment and then immediately one of fear. For X stepped over the fallen man and approached the woman. On his face was a smile of deadly determination. He said in Murdo's voice:

"Come here, sweetheart. Let's see if the electric glove matches your devil magic."

Erlika backed to the farthest wall of the tomb. Her hands crept along the cold stone, groping for something—some weapon, anything with which to stop this man.

"Come, Erlika," X urged. "If you're a good girl, I won't turn on the juice into these gloves. Besides, I gave your Yezidee such a dose he'll probably

*AUTHOR'S NOTE: This device belongs primarily to the burglar who makes a practice of entering hotel rooms locked from the inside. It is a slender-nosed pair of pliers, the inside of the jaws of which are concave and knurled so that the tip of the skeleton key inserted in the lock from the other side may be grasped and turned.

never come out of it. I doubt if the battery could stand much more."

The girl sprang to the right and at the same time drew a gun from the folds of her dark gown. But X leaped at the same time, seizing her in his arms, crushing her gun hand against her own chest. He held her a moment.

"Pull the trigger, Ekrlia, and save the hangman a very unpleasant task."

She spat at his face. "Son of a pig!" she snarled. "Release me. I am the daughter of Erlik."

"You are a very beautiful, completely spoiled, thoroughly wicked woman," he said with a laugh. "And nothing more."

She raised her head suddenly, and her teeth snapped at his throat. At the same time the hard, pointed toes of her pumps kicked his ankles. And then, as his hold upon her became even more firm, she dropped her gun, melted toward him. Her lips, less than an inch from his, whispered while her eyes brimmed with tears.

"Please. You do not understand Erlika. I have only been in this country a year. Think! I was taken from my mother as a baby and brought up in the Yezidee temple. I know nothing else. I came here because I wanted to be with my people. I was tired being worshiped as a goddess by yellow-faced men. I wanted to live like Americans do—to have a home of my own with some nice husband. I wanted to have children and worry about them catching measles. I wanted to have to worry about the grocery bills—"

X laughed. "Lady, as long as you can act like that, your ambition to worry about the grocery bills can't be realized. Hollywood will find you."

The red lips quivered. "You do not believe me. You think I know nothing of love?"

"I think you know quite a bit more than you ought to," X said.

"Please let me go, Art Murdo. Or better, take me with you. We could do

much together, you and I. Is it a bargain?"

X nodded. "I have every intention of taking you with me."

"Then kiss me."

X kissed the inviting lips, then released the girl, and seized her right wrist in his firm grasp. "Oh, I forgot to add when I promised to take you with me that you will be held a prisoner. You can, in fact, consider yourself kidnaped."

"Pig!" she cried. "Deceiver!" And she struggled to free herself from that grip which was like a bracelet of steel about her wrist.

"Ah-ah," X cautioned. "I will let you feel the sting of the electric glove."

OBEDIENTLY she subsided and together they left the vault, X taking the precaution to lock the Mongol inside the vault. But he was only one out of six. Where were the other Yezidee? Perhaps they would soon be looking for Erlika. Yes, Erlika would be the bait that would bring them and the man in the metal mask, the big boss of the mob, within X's reach.

The drive back to Murdo's apartment was one which X was never to forget. Three times Erlika tried to throw herself from the speeding car. Twice she tried to wreck them by jerking the wheel from X's hands. She tried to scratch out his eyes once, and finally embraced him passionately in an effort to make him crash into a street car.

X drove the car directly into the basement garage of the apartment. No sooner had Erlika spied the garage attendant than she yelled: "Help! He's kidnaping me!"

X looked at the attendant and winked. The man remained grave until X passed him a twenty dollar bill which brought an answering wink and a whispered: "The last one didn't have so much spirit, Mr. Murdo."

X got the girl into the elevator and from there to Murdo's apartment. As he was about to unlock the door,

it was opened by Whitey, who evidently possessed a key to the place. Beyond Whitey, X saw Edna just removing her hat in front of the mirror.

Whitey took a look at Erlika. His mouth fell open, and for a moment he seemed powerless to move or speak. Finally, he backed away from the door, asked: "Where did you get that angel, chief?"

X raised his eyebrows. "She came from the farthest extremity from the natural habitat of the angels, Whitey."

"Why, it's—" Edna began, immediately recognizing Erlika.

Erlika gave the redheaded girl a naughty stare. "You will all pay dearly for this!" she threatened.

"I know," X said dryly, "you're dynamite. But we've a place for dangerous things."

Between the two spare bedrooms was what had been intended for a dressing room. It had only one window and it was secured by means of a metal grill closely resembling a Venetian blind from the outside. The single door was backed by a steel plate and fitted with special locks.

Murdo had evidently found it convenient to use this room as a prison for some of his enemies. It was to this room that they took Erlika. After he had locked the heavy, sound-proof door, her angry cries could not be heard more than three feet away.

He started back to the others, but Edna came running to him. Her blue eyes were frightened, her cheeks slightly pale. "There are policemen outside, Whitey says. You'd better get that woman out of here."

X shook his head. "Unless they have a search warrant, we don't have to worry on that score. Open the door, Edna. Where's Whitey?"

Whitey was in the living room thoughtfully smoking a cigarette. X joined him and waited for Edna to usher the police into the room. Two plainclothesmen entered followed by old Mrs. Fauvre, Whitey's mother.

Whitey dropped his cigarette, stood up. "Mom," he said hoarsely.

The old woman ran around the cops, tried to take her tall, lanky son in her arms. "My boy! My poor, misguided boy. You didn't do it. Tell them you didn't do it!"

Whitey looked blankly from his mother to the cops and then to X. The old woman suddenly released her son and directed her entreaties to Agent X.

"Tell them he didn't do it, Mr. Murdo! You've got to help him. He's always been a good boy at heart. He wouldn't kill anybody. Anything that's bad about him you taught him, Mr. Murdo. Now you owe him something—help, at least."

X looked over the old woman's head. "Will you two coppers kindly come to life and let us in on something?"

One of the dicks stepped forward and put a hand on Whitey's shoulder. "I've got a warrant for the arrest of Delmar Fauvre for the murder of A. J. Martin."

FOR A FRACTION of a second, X nearly lost his composure so necessary to his impersonation of Murdo. There was only one man who could possibly have been mistaken for A. J. Martin. That man was Art Murdo himself, disguised as A. J. Martin, and now in a drugged condition in the hotel rooms X had engaged in that name.

It was the most natural mistake in the world for the murderer to make, and at the same time it created a number of confusing possibilities. As soon as the body was subjected to close scrutiny, it would be discovered the supposed Martin was Murdo. Then if Murdo was dead, the Agent's scheme of impersonation would be discovered.

"Where did this happen? When did it happen?" X demanded.

"In the Maywood Hotel," the dick said. "We don't know exactly when, because the coroner's physician had

SAX

not yet arrived when we left. But it's open and shut. One of the room service girls at the hotel saw this Delmar Fauvre—she called him Whitey—going into the room with a knife in his hand. And the clerk remembered signing this Whitey Fauvre for the room directly across the hall from Martin. So—”

X started for the door. “Let’s get over there immediately. I want the lowdown on this. Edna, stay here. I want to—” He left the sentence in the air and made eyes in the direction of the room in which Erlika was imprisoned. Then he led the way from the room with the two dicks, Whitey, and Mrs. Fauvre trailing behind.

In the police car driving to the hotel, X turned to the silent Whitey. “Well, what about it?”

“I didn’t do it,” the towhead said, moodily pulling at his mustache. “But what in hell’s the use if some jealous dame wants to tell the cops that I did?”

“If the chambermaid is lying, we’ll break her story,” X said, more to cheer Whitey’s mother than to hearten Whitey.

The kid was hard. He had been with Murdo long enough to have learned to look callously upon murder. And if he had been drunk, as he usually was, there was no telling what he might have done.

The first move on arriving at the hotel was to take a sample of Whitey’s writing and compare it with the hotel register card the clerk claimed he had filled out. The writing on the card was extremely shaky. It would be difficult to obtain an accurate comparison of the two samples.

X was eager to get to the scene of the crime, but he first made Mrs. Fauvre comfortable in the lobby and assured her that he would do as much as possible for her boy if he was innocent.

“Oh, he is innocent!” the old woman sobbed, wringing the Agent’s hand. “You’ve got to make them believe he is, Mr. Murdo.”

X smiled and hurried after the police and Whitey to the elevator.

Fortunately, the coroner’s physician had not yet arrived, X reflected as he entered the suite of rooms he himself had engaged. The man who looked like A. J. Martin was lying on the bed in the same position in which X had left him. He had been stabbed in the heart. There was nothing to indicate a struggle, naturally, and no evidence of attempted robbery, the police pointed out.

“All right,” X rapped. “Let’s see the room across the hall that Whitey is supposed to have engaged for this murder business.”

A detective produced a pass key, unlocked the door of the room opposite the murder scene. He let X walk in ahead. Everything was in perfect order. There was no evidence of recent occupancy, nothing except the smell of something burning—not tobacco. The bathroom was the source of the burned odor. X led the way into the bathroom and there saw the brown metal waste basket, which would have ordinarily rested beside the writing desk, standing in the bathtub. Inside was a wad of newspapers partially burned.

X seized the paper before the detective could lay hands on it. The burned portion crumbled beneath his fingers. The remaining portion was tinged a slight yellow. He unwrapped the wad, held the open paper in his hands. In the very center of the paper was a tow-colored false mustache, a little spirit gum clinging to the center of it.

“I’ll be damned!” The dick pounced upon the mustache and bounced triumphantly from the room.

X went into the hall. Whitey and the detectives were crowding around, staring at that little piece of crepe hair.

“I guess,” one of the dicks was saying, “this just about clears Whitey of the charge. Somebody was trying to frame him and didn’t get away with it. The disguise the killer wore

in order to make himself resemble Whitey didn't burn as it was intended to. I guess you can go tell your mother the good news."

Whitey grinned, mumbled his thanks, and hurried off.

AGENT X looked up and down the hall. A red light at the rear of the hall indicated the fire escape. It was barely possible that the scheme would work. It *had* to work. He felt that he was too near the climax of his fight with the Mongols to risk having his scheme upset by police interference. And he would be assured of such interference as soon as some of the officials discovered that the supposed A. J. Martin was Murdo.

Without any further thought on the subject, X reached into his pocket and took out a sphere about the size of a large marble. This he threw with all his strength toward the end of the hall nearest the elevators and farthest from the fire escape.

The little ball struck the wall and bounded around the corner. There was a faint pop as the percussion cap it contained ignited the fuse. The ball was a simple firework device with which X hoped to produce a mild panic.

The end of the hall where the little ball landed was suddenly filled with dense black smoke tinged with red flame. X shouted, "Fire!" pointed at the smoke, and immediately the police dashed toward the source of the smoke.

X sprang into the room where the corpse lay, lifted the body, slung it over his shoulder and got out into the hall. The corridor was already crowded with excited people, rushing through the smoke. Several were making toward the fire escape. Others were rushing in a panic in the opposite direction. In the general confusion it must have appeared that X was making a heroic effort to save a man from the fire.

He got to the fire escape, clattered down flight after flight of iron steps,

passing one person after another in spite of his burden. Not until he reached the alley below did a hitch occur in his plan. Out of the shadows stepped a man. A flashlight beamed into X's face. Reflecting rays of light caught on the badge of a uniformed cop.

"Let me give you a hand, brother," said the cop. "Put the man down on the ground. He's probably suffocated from the smoke."

"Got to get him to the hospital," X panted and made an effort to get around the cop. But he was all but exhausted from having lugged the body down the fire escape, and he could have scarcely hoped to have escaped the cop.

The officer got squarely in X's path. His pop-eyes saw the blood that stained the shirt of the murdered man. At the same time, some one above, who had undoubtedly discovered X's hoax, shouted: "Stop that man!"

There was only one thing that X could do and he managed it quite effectively. He stumbled forward, bent low to allow the corpse to slide down to its feet. Then, with all his strength, he shoved the body into the cop. Corpse and cop went down together. X darted from the alley, his energy rapidly returning to him after he dropped his burden.

The cop had regained his feet and drawn his gun. His were not the bullets that followed X as he sprinted up the alley. Some of the police who were in the hotel tried hard to check his bumblebee flight, but he was beyond the accurate range of hand weapons.

At the end of the alley, he ducked into the back door of a tavern on the corner. The place was darkened for the dancers who struggled around a small dance floor to the swing of an electric organ and a pair of saxophones. X passed the dancers, came to the front of the tavern. On his way, he picked up a check intended for

four patrons who were on the point of leaving.

The foursome seemed drunk enough to take a joke, and X promptly stepped into their midst, laughing, slapping the men on the back, calling them by names he made up. When they reached the cashier, X paid the check, and there were no objections made.

"Get us a taxi, toots," X said to the cashier.

One of the men in X's adopted party tapped him on the shoulder and said: "My car's out in front, pal. Where you live?"

X gave the man an address within a block of Murdo's apartment. The man thought it was fine because he was going in the same direction. They walked out the door and across the sidewalk just as a pair of policemen came running along, looking, no doubt, for the Agent. X stepped into the car with the others, suggested that the driver step on it.

He was working now desperately against time. If the police got to Murdo's apartment in time to prevent him from reaching Erlika, his plans would be hopelessly defeated. In kidnaping Erlika, he had intended to sit back and wait for the leader of the Mongol pack to attempt a rescue. Thus he would have the leader and the five remaining Mongols.

But now he would have to find some other place to hide the girl, inasmuch as the police would naturally cover Murdo's apartment closely. Where that other place could be, he had no idea.

HE HURRIED up to Murdo's apartment, unlocked the door and was immediately greeted by Edna's cheerful cry: "That you, Art?"

She came out of a bedroom, holding a gun in her hand. X took the gun from her and put it in his own pocket. He seized her shoulders in both of his hands. His eyes were so earnest they broke the girl's usually level stare.

"I'm in a spot," X said tensely in Murdo's voice. "Getting Whitey out of the jam, I'm in one myself. The police are after me, and we've got to get Erlika out of here. We can't let her go. Where will we take her?"

"How about your country place?" Edna suggested promptly.

"Right! I hadn't thought of that." The simple reason that he had overlooked this hiding place was that he did not know of its existence. "You'll drive. You know the way?"

"Of course. We've been there half a dozen times at least."

"Then I'll get Erlika. We're in for a showdown soon, I hope. Otherwise, you can visit me in jail."

"Art," she caught his arm as he turned to leave the room.

"What?" he demanded impatiently.

"You didn't kill that Martin fellow?"

X laughed. "How could I have—when I was kidnaping Erlika at the time?"

"I don't know," she said softly. She raised her arms, placed them about his neck, wove her cool fingers together, drew herself up to him.

"I just want you to know that it wouldn't have mattered if you had killed. Or done anything else. I know what people say about you. I know where you get your money. It isn't right, the way you get your money."

"Go lecture to the Y. M. C. A.," he said harshly.

She clung to him. "What I mean, no matter what you've done, it doesn't make any difference. I used to think that I liked being with you because you were—well, because you were Murdo the Magnificent, king of the rackets. I thought I was just having a little adventure. Tonight, though, and last night, it's been different, and it's made a difference with me. I love you, Art." She rested her head against his chest and burst into tears.

"No, you don't love me," he said more gently than Murdo could have said it. "You can't, because you don't

know me. No one knows me. No one must ever know me. You don't understand. You'll never understand, but I'll try to explain as we drive. We've got to get Erlika out of here before the police arrive."

He broke away from her. As he went toward the door behind which Erlika was a prisoner, he took from his pocket his cigarette lighter. It was something more than it appeared to be. Within the lighter case was a small cartridge containing a powerful anesthetic gas. A touch of a button and the gas could be directed into the face of the Agent's victim.

X unlocked the door with one hand while the other held the lighter. As the door swung open, Erlika sprang at him like a tigress, fingers clenched, long nails threatening him like ten tiny knives. X flicked the lighter. A puff of vapor clouded the girl's face.

"Better than hashish, Erlika," he said as she fell limp and unconscious into his arms.

He carried Erlika back to the door of the apartment where Edna awaited him. They crossed the hall, brought up the automatic elevator, got in, sent the elevator creeping toward the basement garage. The garage attendant's curiosity had evidently been satisfied by the tip X had given him earlier, for the man asked no questions as X lifted the unconscious woman into Murdo's roadster. With Edna at the wheel, the car was soon cruising down the dark street.

X glanced at Edna's young, pathetically eager face as she handled the car skillfully across town.

"Keep your eyes on the road, Edna," he said softly. "You've told me tonight you love me. Whether it's love or just a young girl's infatuation for an older man who accomplishes a little bit of the task before him, I do not know. We won't argue about it. But in fairness to you, I've got to tell you something."

"Is—is there anybody else? A wife somewhere," she faltered.

"No, Edna. No. You know, I think

I ought to call you Eddy. We've been pals like a couple of boys. And pals are about all we will ever be. You see, Eddy, I'd make a poor excuse for a husband. And besides, I'm not Art Murdo."

She was silent for a moment. Then: "Well, why not go on?"

"That's about all there is to it. I'm not Murdo."

"I know," she said. She breathed a slight sigh. "You're Secret Agent X."

"**Y**OU see," Edna explained, "when you told me to drive the car back to the apartment after you had discovered the body of Morton Edgewood in that garage basement, I didn't go quite as soon as you supposed. I hung around across the street until you came out. But it wasn't Art Murdo who came out. It was that newspaper man, Martin. At first, I thought something had happened to you. I went back into the garage, couldn't find any Art Murdo. That and what you said about no one knowing you—well, two and two, you know."

"I see," X replied.

"And then it makes it easier for me," the girl continued. "I took a job with the D. A. trying to get some convicting evidence out of Murdo. I was supposed to make him fall in love with me—a nice job for a nice girl!"

"Your job has just about played out, then," X told her. "Murdo was murdered." And he explained briefly how Murdo had been mistaken for Martin.

While they had been talking, Edna's foot had not relaxed on the accelerator. About ten miles outside the city limits she turned the car up a steeply inclined cinder drive. The drive ran into a garage at one side of a three-story frame house that looked as though it had undergone recent remodeling. X handed Edna Murdo's keys.

"You probably can find the right one quicker than I," he said. "Be-

side, I've got to handle Erlika." Erlika was showing signs of reviving, X had noticed, and he was anxious to get her into the house before the trouble began.

With Erlika in his arms and Edna leading the way, X entered the house. He made a brief survey of its layout and decided the most strategic position for them to await the coming of Erlika's rescuers was a large game room on the third floor. Windows of this room commanded an excellent view of the winding, moonlit drive below.

"Now nothing to do but wait and make ourselves comfortable," X said to Edna, after he had placed Erlika in a chair. "We've all the comforts of home—radio, billiard table, comfortable chairs, though a trifle too modern to suit my fancy. Ah, there's a bar apparently well stocked. A drink wouldn't hurt us." X headed for a small, ornate bar at one end of the room.

"Erlika's coming to," Edna warned.

"Oh, we'll mix a drink for her, too," X said. "How about it, Erlika?" He looked over his shoulder to see the lovely, dangerous woman open her eyes and stare about her bewilderedly. She made no effort to get from the chair. She tried to burn Edna to ashes with a scornful look.

X went on mixing the drinks, came back to the two women a little later with three tall glasses and a plate of spiced wafers on a tray. He put the tray down on a small table which he placed between Edna and Erlika. Then he pulled up a chair for himself and sat down.

"Do not be so complacent, Art Murdo," Erlika said scornfully. "You will not escape. For this thing you have done to me, you will die a hundred deaths. Do you suppose I will not be found?"

"I'm not," X said in the voice of Murdo, "supposing you won't be found. I'm looking forward to it, in fact. Otherwise I should have simply given the name of the leader of your

mob to the police and allowed them to clean up the mess. I'd rather handle the matter personally, thus saving the police some bloodshed, and saving me 'loss of face,' as the Chinese say." He lifted his glass. "Here's to a short future and a merry one."

EDNA raised her glass. Erlika stared moodily at hers. She reached across the table with her bracelet-ornamented arm and took one of the spiced crackers. She nibbled it. She said: "That is too old a trick to fool me. You have poisoned my drink. I know that you have."

X shrugged. "Then we'll trade. I'm immune to poison."

He exchanged glasses with Erlika. Erlika drank slowly, suspiciously. Edna seemed tuned to Erlika's uneasiness and got little enjoyment out of her drink. X tossed his off quickly, wiping his mouth with his handkerchief afterwards.

Erlika put down her glass, leaned both elbows on the table, fastened her eyes on X's face. X leaned back in his chair. He pulled Murdo's automatic from his pocket, stroked its sleek, polished barrel affectionately.

"Yes," he said, "we will be more than a match for your Mongols when they come, I presume that the leader of your mob will come tearing down here with them. That is as I would prefer it. Then we can do a thorough job." X rested his gun in his lap. His eyelids looked heavy, drooped.

"You see, Erlika," he mumbled, then paused. "What was I going to say?"

"That you feel sleepy?" Erlika prompted, her smile widening.

"Now that you mention it, I—I" X struggled to sit up, but seemed to lack the strength. He passed a trembling hand over his forehead. "Stuffy in here—"

Edna sprang to her feet with a cry of alarm. Her horrified eyes were fastened on X's face which had become strangely lax. X muttered: "Not so much noise. Want to sleep—"

And then he tumbled sidewise from his chair to the floor. The gun dropped from his lap beside him. Both Edna and Erlika sprang for the gun at the same time. Edna was inches nearer to it, but as she stooped, Erlika kicked her mercilessly on the wrist, shoved her out of the way, swept up the gun, turned it on Edna. Erlika's eyes flashed. Her laugh rippled musically.

"Now, we shall see who is the cleverer," she cried. "I drugged my own drink with a tiny tablet which I dropped from the hollow bangle on my bracelet when I was reaching for the crackers. He is so gullible, this Murdo. I had no trouble getting him to trade glasses with me, you see?"

She turned the gun threateningly upon Edna. "You will make no move to interfere with my plans, redheaded ugly one, or I will shoot you."

On the other side of the room, the ringing phone interrupted Erlika's threat. She took cat-like steps toward the instrument, beckoning Edna to follow her. Edna obeyed.

"Pick up the phone," Erlika ordered. "Hold the receiver several inches from your ear so that I may hear also."

Edna obeyed woodenly. She gave the immobile Agent X a frightened glance. "Hello," she said tremulously.

"This is Whitey," came loudly from the phone. "Edna? The chief there with you?"

"Yes," she replied.

"And the kidnaped female, huh? Well, listen, what the hell am I supposed to do? Sit here and chew my nails?"

Erlika said loudly: "Tell him to come at once and bring the boys. You understand. Bring the boys. The trap can work both ways."

Edna repeated the message word for word at Erlika's dictation.

"I get it," Whitey said. He broke the connection.

The phone slipped from Edna's fingers to the floor. Erlika ordered her to pick it up.

"I know that trick, too," Erlika said. "You would shout for help and hope the exchange operator heard you. Sit down in that chair." Erlika indicated a chair which faced the spot where X lay on the floor. Edna obeyed.

Erlika raised her skirt and pulled a lean-bladed knife from her garter. She said: "Now you will see how long it takes a man to die." She dropped to her knees beside Agent X.

CHAPTER VIII

DESIGN FOR DYING



EVERY muscle in Edna's body quivered. She was caught in the rip-tide of two powerful forces. Self preservation demanded that she remain

quietly seated under the watchful eye of Erlika's gun. Yet it seemed she could not sit there and watch the deadly work of Erlika's knife on the Agent's body. If there was only something she could do.

But Erlika had designed her vengeance with a mind trained in the cruelty of the Yezidee sect. Death for this man who had defied her; slow, agonizing, mental torment for the girl who loved that man.

"You will watch him bleed to death from a thousand cuts," Erlika's smiling lips said.

Three times she thrust downward with the point of her knife, to check it a hair's breadth from the Agent's face each time. Three times Edna screamed shrilly, hysterically. And Erlika laughed.

"He has a nice face," Erlika said. "His lower lip is too long and we will have to cut it off. And I would have him have a deep scar on his face. Several such scars would prevent his friends from saying how natural he looks when they look into the coffin. American racketeers have such nice funerals, don't you think?"

With the point of her knife, Erlika drew a delicate cut across X's cheek. But no blood flowed. Erlika scowled and Edna held her breath. The knife had only pierced the layer of makeup material on X's face.

"What is this thing he wears for a face?" Erlika puzzled. "It is like flesh, yet it does not bleed. How very odd. I should like to peek beneath and see what kind of a man this is, I should—"

The door of the room opened. In spite of Erlika's threatening gun, Edna sprang to her feet. Whitey? Was it Whitey and Murdo's men?

Yes! The men who crowded through the door looked like gunmen, caps and hats pulled low over their faces and collars turned up. Erlika laughed, and her laughter struck cold despair to Edna's heart. Erlika made no move to protect herself from the men who had entered the room.

And then as light crept under the bill of one of the men's caps, Edna

saw a hard, cruel, yellow face. Mongols! X's scheme had worked as he had planned. But X lay helpless on the floor.

Edna's hand flattened over her mouth to check a scream. In the center of the group was one man whose face was masked with a demon mask of golden metal—the leader X had tried to trap!

Then some one in the hall cried out in English: "Cops!" There was a moment of silence in the room during which all listened to the wail of sirens on approaching squad cars. The police, Edna knew, had discovered that the man they supposed to be Murdo

*Gunfire rang out
over the crackle of
flames.*



was some one else—was Agent X. To all appearances, it must seem to the police that Agent X was the murderer of the real Murdo who had died wearing the disguise of Martin.

Erlika spoke rapidly to the men in a language that Edna did not know. The men turned, ran from the room, drawing automatics as they hurried to the stairway. Erlika's laugh rang out madly. She whirled toward Agent X, spoke to his immobile figure:

"You are the one who is responsible for all this. You should die a thousand deaths, if there were only time." Then she dropped to her knees, lips drawn back from clenched teeth, the knife raised above her head.

"Stop!" cried Edna. She sprang toward Erlika. Erlika's left hand carried a gun she had taken from X. She jerked the trigger as soon as her sights had covered Edna.

But no sound came from the gun save an empty click. She flung the gun at Edna, drove down with all her strength with her knife—straight toward X's chest.

THE AGENT'S TWO HANDS flashed upward, seized Erlika's knife wrist, twisted. The knife dropped to the floor. Erlika sprang to her feet. She had been tricked—tricked by the man who had so frequently cheated death, who seemed immune to drugs, who had palmed off an empty gun on Erlika and laughed. Erlika whirled, ran through the door.

X was on his feet in a moment. He had every intention of following Erlika, though he knew there was little chance of her escaping. He had heard all that passed in the room. Clever as Erlika had been, she had not been able to conceal from X's keen sight that momentary movement when she had dropped the drugged pill into the glass of liquor that X had apparently taken into his mouth.

Actually, X had allowed the drink to pass his lips. But immediately afterwards, pretending to dry his mouth with his handkerchief, he had spit out

the drugged liquor into a rubber inter-lining of his handkerchief. It was a trick he had frequently used, but never with better success than tonight.

No sooner was he on his feet than Edna threw herself into his arms, clung to him passionately. The girl seemed to have forgotten entirely that such action on her part prevented X from following Erlika.

Quickly, but not unkindly, he broke Edna's embrace. Downstairs, the Mongols had opened up with their guns. Outside, the police had laid siege to the house. Gunsmoke rolled in clouds through the door. Or was it gunsmoke? There was more the smell of burning tar about it.

X plunged into the smoke-filled hall. At the rail of the circular stairway that wound its corkscrew way from the third to the first floor, a man shoved a blazing can of tarlike stuff over the bannister. Like a comet with a tail twenty feet in length, the can rocketed downward as X lunged at the man at the rail, his only weapon the knife he had taken from Erlika.

The man turned. Beneath his hat, there was no face—nothing but a demon mask of golden metal. The man raised both hands above his head. X thrust the knife against the man's chest, reached up and jerked off the metal mask. Beneath the mask was the smiling yellow face of Prince Djamok.

Djamok bowed as much as the threatening knife would permit. "I not knowing you, but enemy of Erlika same as friend of me. I being annoyed by too many kidnaping by Erlika and misguided fellow countrymen."

"You mean they kidnaped and forced you to come here?"

Djamok bowed, shouted above the noise of the gunfire: "I being forced to wear devil mask without knowing why."

X knew why well enough. The leader of the Mongol mob had needed a fall guy badly. And what better fall

guy for the leader of the Mongols than another Mongol? If anything went wrong with the leader's plans, he had only to toss Djamok to the police.

Black smoke rolled like a monstrous dragon up the circular stairway. In the light of scarlet flames below, X could see black shadows that were men running to escape the flames. The gunfire had abated but little in spite of the fire that Djamok had caused.

Djamok looked proud of his work. He had escaped from his captors at the time of the police attack and had started the fire with this roof patching compound that he had found in a storeroom. X did not think that firing the house was the wisest move Djamok could have made, for the flames would only drive the Mongols into the upper portion of the house. But the damage had been done and had to be made the most of.

The leader of the mob must not escape. X's mind was firmly made up on that point. Ordinarily, he preferred to hand criminals he captured over to the police so that justice might take its course. But in this case, justice to the leader would only mean injustice to one who had already suffered too much. But how to trap the man? How to make certain of his death?

X turned to the storeroom Djamok had indicated and returned at once with a length of rope he had found there. Djamok at his heels, X ran back into the game room. He glanced around. Edna—where was Edna? He sprang to the window, dropped the rope to the ground, looped the end around the radiator and tied what appeared to be a secure knot.

The knot, however, was one of those "melting" slip knots which magicians often use in rope tricks. Any weight on the dangling end of the rope would result in the knot coming untied. X had only to steer the mob leader toward this means of apparent escape and his task would be over.

HE turned from the radiator. Now to find Edna. Then to drive the mob leader toward the one avenue of escape—the window that meant death.

Djamok was eyeing X with a puzzled expression upon his face. X said: "The red-haired girl—did you see which way she went?"

"She not going very far, certainly," Djamok said. "I being most happy to help find." And he followed X from the room.

The upper reaches of the house were filled with smoke. X held a handkerchief over his face, stumbled from room to room. Now and then he would remove the handkerchief long enough to call out the girl's name, but it was doubtful if she could have heard above the roar of the flame and the intermittent sputter of gunfire.

And then he saw the figure of a woman, flying wraithlike through the murk ahead of him. He shouted, broke into a run, falling over furniture in his effort to catch her.

The woman ran into the game room. "Edna!" X shouted. "Stop!"

The woman laughed, turned her head. X saw for an instant Erlika's gleaming smile. It was Erlika whom he pursued, not Edna. And Erlika was at the window—the window that was death's door.

X lunged forward, hands outstretched. But before he could reach her, Erlika was over the sill, had the rope in her hands. And the knot slipped. The end of the rope whipped from around the radiator.

X heard Erlika's piercing scream out of the blackness of the night. And before he could touch it, the rope was snapped over the sill. There was no screaming then, no laughter, no sound but the mocking crackle of the fire.

X pivoted. Above the roar of the fire, he heard Djamok's voice calling: "I have found her. She is safe!"

X rushed to the door, brought himself to a stop. The hasp of Erlika's knife was clasped in his right hand. Directly in front of him, his triangu-

lar face pale, his tow-colored hair scorched, his blond mustache awry, was Whitey Fauvre. He had a heavy automatic in his hand and it centered unwaveringly on the Agent.

"I'm getting out of here," Whitey said. "You're not stopping me."

The eyes of Agent X became as stern as granite. The muscles of his jaws were set. "You're not going anywhere, Whitey, if I have to kill you to make you stay. *You* are the leader of the Mongol gang, even though Erlika might have been the brains.

"When you phoned here a while ago and Edna answered the phone, Erlika told Edna what to say loud enough for you to hear Erlika's voice and know that she had the situation in hand. You were to 'bring the boys'—bring your Mongols and finish the job.

"But even before that I knew you were the man who killed Murdo, who you thought to be A. J. Martin at the time. It was cleverly done, all right.

"It was smart of you to frame yourself for the murder which you actually committed. And smarter to leave evidence to prove to the police that you *were* framed. But didn't it occur to you that if some one had wanted to kill the man you thought was Murdo and at the same time throw the blame on you by disguising himself as you, that the killer would have taken every precaution to *prevent* the false mustache from falling into the hands of the police?

"Of course it occurred to you. That's why you tried to make it appear as though the murderer had wanted to destroy the false mustache. You wrapped the mustache in a piece of newspaper and set the paper on fire, first making sure that the portion of the paper containing the evidence you wanted the police to find could not burn. You had fire-proofed that portion of the paper by dipping it in ordinary water glass, I imagine.

"Police overlooked the fact that *had*

some one been trying to frame you by impersonating you, the logical thing for that some one to do was to simply put the false mustache in his pocket and walk away. Not try to destroy it until he had it far away from the scene of the crime."

THE AGENT paused, eyed Whitey's automatic. The gun was held straight and level. X decided to keep talking.

"You are the man who should have rightfully worn the Mongol devil mask tonight. You were the man who wore it last night when you tried to get me to join the Yezidee cult. That story about you having been asleep in the rumble seat of the roadster when Edna followed my captors was just a story.

"When Edna and I succeeded in breaking up your Yezidee meeting, you simply ran out. You beat us to the car and alibied yourself by pretending to cover our escape from the house.

"You did that because you were yellow, Whitey. You're too yellow to drop that gun and fight it out man to man. You're so yellow that I can't permit your blubbering in the prisoners box in a court of justice when your sentence is pronounced. You're not leaving this building alive, because that poor old mother of yours would never live through her boy's murder trial. I'm thinking of her when I'm killing you!"

The Agent's hand shot out, palm up and open, Erlika's knife lying in his hand. With incredible swiftness he moved, and the knife traveled the short distance to Whitey like a ray of silvery light. Whitey's gun bucked, roared. X swerved to one side, felt the tug of the bullet through his coat.

Whitey would not shoot again with his right hand, for Erlika's knife showed its glittering handle against Whitey's right forearm. The blade had thrust cleanly through flesh and muscle.

As soon as he had delivered the

knife, X launched himself in a low leap. His arms caught Whitey around lean thighs. Whitey had got his gun into his left hand and hacked down with it to X's head as they fell to the floor together. For a moment, X was blinded by the blow. His brain was a whirlpool.

Several moments he fought instinctively, pounding telling blows into Whitey's chest. And then he felt the shock of cold gun steel touching the side of his head. He brought his head down hard, his face flat against Whitey's chest as the gun roared. At the same time, he reached up and back, seized Whitey's left hand, twisted the gun from Whitey's grasp.

He flung the weapon aside, kept up that relentless pounding of the killer until Whitey's resistance became feeble and finally failed altogether.

X got to his knees. He was pulling in great lungfuls of smoke-laden air. In front of him, the rail of the circular stairway had teeth of red flame. It occurred to him that quite possibly this was the end.

There might be no escape. He and the killer might well go down into the burning wreckage together. Had he been sure that Edna and Djamok had escaped, he would have accepted his exit cue as something which Fate had written into her strange drama. But he had to know what had become of the girl.

Smoke curled up from between the floorboards in the hall. Flames were hungry tongues that whipped from the walls to taste his flesh, as he staggered on, searching the ruddy darkness with seared eyeballs for a glimpse of Edna.

Ahead of him, a door burst open. A woman's voice, hoarse with smoke, screamed: "Agent X!"

Edna! She was standing in the doorway of the store-room calling to him. And then between him and the girl a curtain of flame roared to the ceiling, died down almost immediately as a section of the flooring sagged downward like a piece of limp paper.

X ran toward the flaming gap in the floor and leaped. He landed on all fours, the burning floor scorching his hands. Then he was on his feet, running toward the girl.

"Quick!" she gasped. "Djamok has found a way out. A ladder in the store-room—"

X seized the girl around the waist, all but carried her through the door. At one end of the low-roofed attic store-room, a gable window was open. Through it, X could see the end of a ladder disappearing. He ran to the window and looked out. Ten feet below, on a metal roof that jutted out over a large bay window, stood Djamok trying to pull the twenty-foot ladder through the window.

X steadied the wavering end of the ladder and as soon as it was clear and mounted on the tin roof below, he helped Edna get out the window and swing onto the ladder.

While she climbed down, X's fingers moved swiftly, skillfully over his face, altering the features that identified him as Murdo. Murdo's wallet and keys, which might have identified him, he tossed over his shoulder into the flames. Then he, too, swung out of the window, got to the ladder and climbed down to the roof.

THE WHOLE BUILDING seemed to tremble beneath them, and X and Djamok lowered the ladder from the tin roof to the ground. Flames writhed to the black roof of the sky, shrieking like tormented beasts. One whole side of the building had given way.

The ladder was in place, held at its foot by police. Djamok went first to aid Edna while X lingered on the roof, making sure that the change in the contours of the plastic which covered his face had made him unrecognizable. Then he, too, descended to the waiting police.

The police had readily identified Edna and Djamok. They were uncertain about X.

"What's your name, buddy?" one

of them asked, preparing to write it in his notebook.

"He's my brother from Chicago," Edna spoke up.

"Okay, lady," said a cop. "We'll have to have his full name for the report."

"Edward Carse," Edna said.

The cop looked queerly at X. "Can't you talk for yourself?"

X shook his head. "Painful. Face burned."

The cop turned to Edna. "Guess you'll have to speak for the trio then. The prince's English isn't so hot. Your brother is tongue-tied—"

But X heard no more. With a flashing smile at Edna Carse, he turned, and slipped into the shadows.

Oddly enough, Edna could not satisfy the police officer at that moment. She burst into tears. . . .

The following morning, another woman was to burst into tears because of a man—a different sort of a man. This woman was old and gray-haired. She sat at the window of her meagerly furnished second-floor room and opened a paper packet that had come by post.

To her amazement, ten green pieces of paper, each one a thousand-dollar bill, fluttered to the floor at her feet. On top of the packet was a typewritten note which read:

Dear Mrs. Fauvre:

I am indeed sorry to report that your son Delmar "Whitey" Fauvre lost his life last night. It may console you a little to know that your son died for the cause of law and order. He was engaged in a secret mission to wipe out crime and corruption in this city when he fell.

In appreciation for what Delmar Fauvre did, I beg you to accept and enjoy to the rest of your days, the enclosed.

Sympathetically,

A CITIZEN.

And "a citizen" who was gray-eyed Secret Agent X, sat in the office of K9 in Washington and told his story.

"You see, K9," X concluded, "this woman known as Erlika, who had been born of American parents—who were later murdered by Mongolian

bandits—evidently came across her birth certificate which proved she was an American citizen. From Mongolia she journeyed to America, probably gaining the Mongol's permission by promising to establish a Yezidee sect in this country.

"Probably Erlika traveled over the country, enjoying herself with riches the Mongols had provided for her. She arrived at Maywood, where she met Whitey Fauvre. Probably, Whitey made love to her, something no one could have blamed Whitey for.

"Erlika returned that love, but she had been brought up to believe herself a superior being, a Mongol goddess, the reincarnation of the daughter of Erlik. She naturally felt that it would be beneath her position to mate with a common gunman like Whitey."

K9 nodded. "So she decided to elevate Whitey to a position of importance in the underworld. By George, that's it! Make Whitey king of crime and she could then be queen. She imported her devil-worshipping servants, knowing what an impression Mongol cruelty could make upon the American gunmen. But what became of this Erlika? By George, she was a type!"

"She fell from the window, caught in the trap I had intended for Whitey," X said. "The spot where she fell was shortly covered by the collapsed wall of the burning building."

"Then there's not a chance of her being alive," K9 said. "Not a chance, unless there's something in this devil's daughter business."

"I don't know about this devil's daughter business," X said, "but she couldn't have escaped. I think we can dispense with any and all romanticism about Erlika. She was beautiful, but her kiss was a death kiss—and very often a horrible death. We may feel sorry that one so beautiful made mockery of justice, but we cannot feel sorry that justice finally prevailed.

"She claimed to be the devil's daughter and—I don't mean to pun—she went to the devil."

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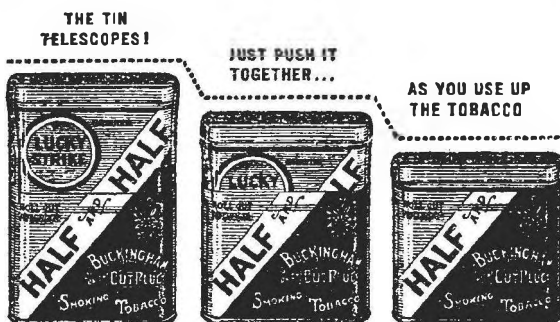
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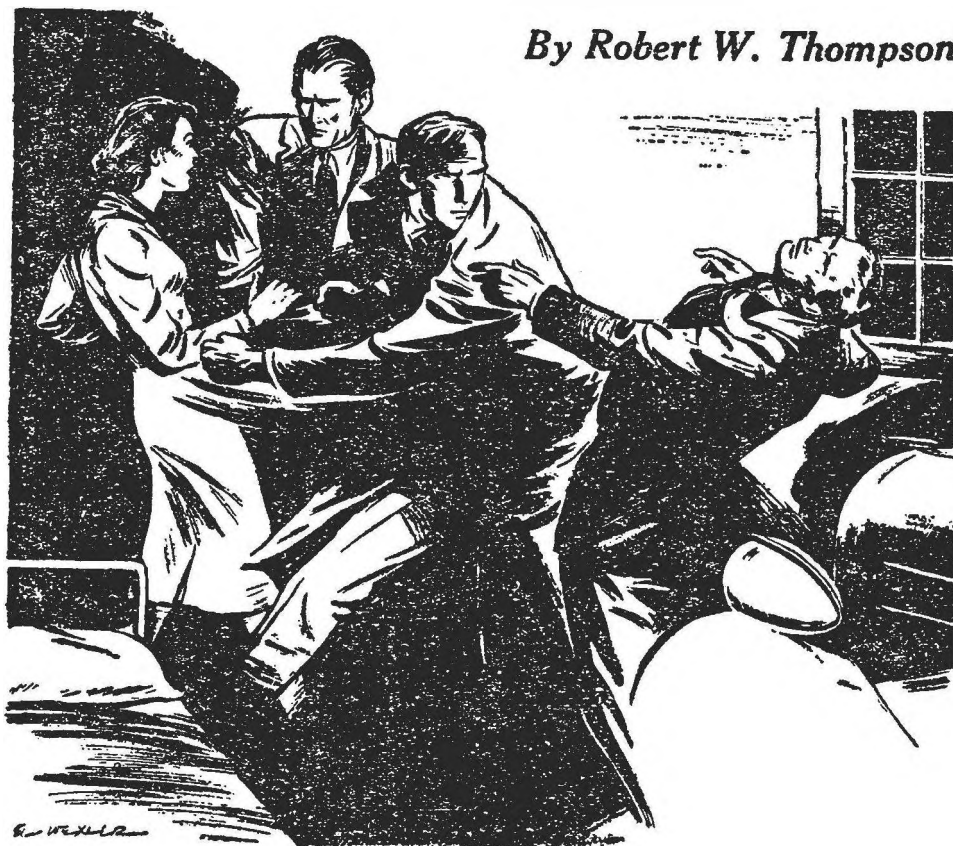
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Bullet Business

By Robert W. Thompson



If you want to live a long time, mind your own business. A private detective is paid to mind somebody else's business. Doug Collins was a shamus—who liked to earn his pay.

WHEN the Boston bound bus stopped at Framingham, Kay Merrill felt a tingle of apprehension along her spine. She was looking out the bus window at the two men waiting for passengers to alight. One man was tall and fat-bodied, the other tiny and fragile-looking beside him. Both men were gazing straight at her.

She twisted her head away, feeling the hot flush of blood into her cheeks. Those men, watching her—detectives, probably. She felt her

heart bound, thinking of the hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars' worth of stolen diamonds in her possession.

The fat man was coming along the aisle toward her now, the little man almost hidden by his bulk. Kay Merrill's slim body grew rigid; her brown eyes locked with the fat man's expressionless gray ones. She was in the next to the last seat, her small brown traveling bag beside her. There were only a half-dozen other passengers, all in the seats ahead. The fat man

walked straight to the girl's seat and stopped there, his face a malicious white moon above her.

"You're Miss Merrill, right?" His voice was flat, without emotion. The girl nodded, the slim oval of her face drained of color now. The fat man calmly scooped the traveling bag from the seat, handed it to his companion and said: "Hang onto it."

The little man said, "Gotcha," and slipped into the seat in front of the girl. He twisted his narrow sharp face, his eyes sliding over Kay's finely cut features, the soft brown hair, the rounded contours of the slender body. The fat man crowded in ponderously beside her.

"Babe," he said, "we don't want trouble. We just want the stones in that bag." He pushed his pocketed right fist against her side, and something hard and round made her wince. "A rod. One yap and you get it. Be nice and we leave you at Boston, see?"

Kay Merrill looked into the round white face, into the expressionless gray eyes. "I see," she said quietly. "I won't make any trouble; don't worry."

"I'm not worrying," the fat man said, and something in the flat tone made her shudder.

The bus lights went out, and they swung along the turnpike with an occasional roadside light slashing the interior for a moment and then vanishing. As they neared Boston, she relaxed somewhat; after all, these men weren't detectives, and she wasn't headed for prison—yet, anyway.

THE BUS rolled into Park Square, and the fat man rose, leaned over and said: "So long, babe. Thanks for the little present." Then he and the other man were going along the aisle, were alighting.

Before she climbed out, they had disappeared into the terminal. She stepped down, and a man in a light-

gray topcoat approached her and said:

"You Kay Merrill?"

She gazed up into virile, highboned features and probing blue eyes. He was a big, blond man, solidly built; his shoulder muscles rounded tightly under the coat when he doffed his hat. To Kay Merrill he looked a bit hardboiled, a bit worldly wise, and—interesting.

"Yes," she nodded, "I'm Kay Merrill."

"My name's Collins." He wasn't looking at her now. His left hand was dug into the pocket of his coat, and his eyes swiveled over the crowd, into the terminal. "Doug Collins. Detective."

"Detective! You're—"

"Private dick," he said. "Louis Retner hired me to come around and see that you're not bothered. He wants you to come right to the apartment."

She breathed deeply. "I see. Did he tell you why he wanted me protected?"

"None of my business. A hundred bucks and no questions asked. Fifty in advance." A slight smile curved his wide mouth—a cynical smile, she thought. "I'm the kind of a guy that doesn't ask too many questions."

He touched her arm, piloted her to a cab, gave the address. She settled back in the seat beside him, waited until the cab was whirling out of the red glare of neon signs before she spoke.

"Two men got into the bus at Framingham and took my traveling bag from me. One of them held a gun on me all the way to the terminal."

"Know the guys?"

"I'd never seen them before. One was a fat man, the other one small and thin. They—"

"Tubber' Norris and 'Pinky' Dryden," he said. "A couple of sweet rod boys. I saw them come out of the bus, and I wondered what they were doing traveling with decent people. Why'd they grab the bag? What was in it?"

"Nothing. That is, nothing except

a few things for an overnight stay."
"Uh-huh. They didn't get what they were after, then?"

She turned her face to him, catching his cool scrutiny. "I wouldn't know," she said easily. "It all depends on what they were after."

He smiled a little. "Okay, let's forget it. It's my job to take you to Retner and hang around for a couple hours while he does some business. I'll stick to my job."

They were silent then until the cab halted before a brownstone apartment house in a quiet Back Bay street. Collins paid the driver, waited until the cab had turned the corner, and said: "Nobody following. Let's go."

They went into a dim, small lobby and took the self-service elevator to the third floor. Collins rapped crisply on a door marked 302. A half minute passed; there was no sound inside the apartment. Collins gripped the knob, pushed inward.

The door swung in noiselessly. Collins motioned Kay into the room, followed her and closed the door. Kay's eyes widened as they took in the ripped-open chairs, the inverted table, the doubled-over rug.

Collins strode to the closed bedroom door, palmed it open. He said softly, without turning his head: "Retner had visitors."

Kay Merrill moved to the bedroom door, staring past him at the figure of Louis Retner. Retner lay on his back in the bed, fully dressed except for shoes and stockings. He was a small man, thin-faced; his eyes were open, unblinking. The smooth bone handle of a knife protruded from his heart. His bared feet were blackened, swelled with blisters. There were stubs of burned matches on the bed and floor. Kay turned her face away with a little shudder.

Collins closed the door, strode to the phone stand and dialed police headquarters. When he twisted away from the phone, his face was taut, grim.

"I'm asking questions now," he said. "My client's been murdered. Tortured first—his feet burned like that. What was he to you and what's it all about?"

"I'm his secretary," she said quietly. "He was a dealer in gems. He came here to sell certain diamonds to a Mr. Norman—Martin S. Norman, I think it was. This afternoon he sent me a telegram, told me to come along here. He often did that—went out of town on a deal, hired an apartment for a week or so, then called me to do some secretarial work for him. I—I imagine that's what he wanted me here for this time."

There was a light, discreet tap on the door. Collins slid his left hand into his coat pocket and said: "Come right in."

A CHUNKY MAN entered the room, closed the door softly, and swept off his gray Homburg. He bowed slightly, his penetrating dark eyes moving from Collins to the girl. There was a suggestion of arrogance in his cool smile.

"I am Martin S. Norman," he said precisely, stroking a finger across his black sliver of mustache. "I am here to transact business with Mr. Retner. I hardly expected anyone else to be present."

Collins said: "I'm Collins, private dick. This is Miss Kay Merrill, Retner's secretary. He won't be seeing you or anyone else. He's dead."

"Really!" Norman's eyebrows lifted slightly. "And only this morning I arranged a meeting with him. I was to buy certain diamonds—one hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth, as a matter of fact. He seemed in perfect health this morning. Heart attack, perhaps?"

Collins smiled without humor. "You might call it that. He's in the bedroom with a knife in his heart."

"Ah," Norman said, "death by violence, then. Suicide or murder?"

"Murder. Tortured first, his feet burned."

Norman touched a fingertip to his mustache. "And you came here, Miss Merrill, to take notes on the proposed transaction?"

Kay nodded. "I imagine that's why he called me here. He usually did when he was on a deal in another town."

"And the diamonds," Norman asked, "are they here?"

"We haven't looked," Collins said. "That's a job for the police. Anyway, it looks as though some one ransacked the whole place. You'd better stay and explain about the deal."

"Surely." Norman's penetrating dark eyes gleamed. "I wouldn't think of leaving now. I must confess I'm interested in police procedure in a case like this."

Kay Merrill's lips drew together. The police would want to know where those diamonds were after they searched the apartment. They might have a matron search *her*. How could she explain the presence of those stolen diamonds, concealed on her person. . . ?

Captain Anderson from headquarters pointed a bony forefinger at Norman and said: "Listen, we know this Retner guy was one of the biggest dealers in stolen gems in the East—a big-time fence. How about it, Norman, was he selling you stolen stones or not?"

Martin S. Norman smiled up coolly and arrogantly from the comfortable depths of a ripped chair. "Now, captain," he said precisely, "you know I wouldn't buy stolen property. That would make me liable to a prison sentence. It's exactly as I told you. I met Retner about two months ago here in town. I told him I'd like to buy the Haskins diamonds. I'm something of a collector of gems, you know. Now, the Haskins diamonds aren't stolen property, are they?"

"No-o," Anderson said grudgingly. "He bought them from the Haskins estate. Probably one of the few honest deals he ever made. Got them

cheap enough to make a neat fifty grand on them."

"Exactly. So Retner came into Boston a few days ago to arrange a sale with me. I agreed to come here tonight, sign a check for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, and take the diamonds. Retner wanted time to look me up thoroughly. I'm sure he found everything satisfactory. I own quite a trucking business, you know."

Kay Merrill watched Anderson nod wearily. Collins stood beside her in the living room, topcoat over his arm, his blond hair slick and shining in the light. Kay was pale, her lips compressed.

Anderson turned to her and said: "Okay, miss, you can go now. You too, Collins. I'll want to see you both again later. Call and tell me where you're staying when you get a room, miss, understand?"

She nodded, slipped into her coat, adjusted her hat. Collins smiled down at her. "How about a bite to eat, lady? You must be hungry after that bus ride."

"I'm famished," she said. "I forgot about it during the excitement, but now—" She laughed a little, looking up into his eyes. No hardboiled worldliness in them now; a seriousness rather, a warmth.

Collins slanted his hat on his head, took her arm and strode out with her. Anderson's doleful tones floated after them:

"Hell, the boys went through the whole dump and couldn't find any stones. I'm telling you, Bert, this thing is getting me sore."

UP THE STREET, after they had battled through reporters and photographers, Collins said: "On Retner's murder, lady, I have a few theories. I'll tell you what they are over coffee. And I know a pippin of a coffee shop over on Huntington. . . ."

A car crawled up beside them like a huge black bug in the quiet street. The rear door swung open; a figure spewed from the car's interior. Col-

lins twisted, left hand plunging into his coat pocket. But the man who had leaped from the car gripped something in his hand that made a dull shine in the night.

"Easy," he said flatly. "Easy, or the babe gets it."

Kay Merrill stared at the fat-bodied figure, into the round face. "Tubber Norris!" she whispered.

Collins' hand came up slowly out of his pocket. To shoot, he knew, would mean the girl's death. He said tightly:

"Okay, Tubber, what's the idea?"

"Inside, and find out," the flat voice said. "You first, dick."

Collins walked across to the car's door. Tubber's weapon prodded his side, and his gun was dug from his pocket. He slid into a corner of the rear seat. The driver turned toward him, holding a short-barreled revolver. Collins said:

"Hello, Pinky. Looking for a reason to go back to Charlestown for a stretch?"

Pinky scowled at that, but said nothing. Kay Merrill climbed in beside Collins, and Tubber rested his fat bulk beside her. Pinky shot the car away from the curbing. Tubber said:

"No tricks, dick, or the babe gets it. I've got a rod in her side. One funny move and it'll be too bad."

Kay Merrill felt the gun bore through cloth, felt its round hard outline against her side. Her heart was a live, bounding thing inside her. She looked at Tubber and shuddered. . . . Collins' square, strong hand gripped hers, and she felt strength flow into her at the contact.

The black car rocketed across town, past the Public Gardens and the Commons, into Washington Street and through a maze of short dark streets to a district of warehouses, factories, and abandoned tenements. Pinky braked the car before the high blank face of a warehouse, jumped out, unlocked sheet-metaled doors.

He climbed under the wheel again.

piloted the car into blackness. A moment later the doors clanged shut. A bar slammed into place, and a great overhead bulb exploded white light.

Pinky opened the rear door, motioned Collins out with his revolver. Tubber slid out the other side. Kay Merrill followed him, standing on a cement floor, under a low, beamed ceiling. Her eyes quested over the bareness of the small garage room, with its tow-rope and tools in one corner, and sleeping cots and table in the other. Tubber said, almost in her ear:

"Over to the corner, babe, and take a seat."

She walked to the corner, her high heels clicking sharply. She sat on the edge of a cot, hands clenched on her knees. Collins moved to the corner with long strides, sat stiffly in the cot opposite her, a few feet away. Pinky held his revolver within inches of Collins' head. Kay looked up into Tubber's face. His lips were drawn down, his gray eyes slitted. He said flatly:

"You pulled a phony on us back there, babe. We thought we were getting the stones, and you let us think so. Look." He backed to the car, pulled something from the front seat.

It was her brown traveling bag, ragged and slashed. Tubber held it in front of her, opened it wide so that she could look down into it. The lining was ripped open. "Nothing in there, babe," Tubber said. "Nothing but your silks—"

"So what?" Collins' voice had a sharp edge. "What'd you expect to—"

"Shut up," Tubber said. "One more peep out of you, dick, and Pinky'll smack in that head of yours." He slid the bag under the cot. "Now, babe, we know you had the stones. We know you were carrying them to Retner. Where are they?"

Kay Merrill shook her head. "I don't know. I came to Boston to do some secretarial work for—"

"Can it."

TUBBER slapped her with his free hand. Her head rolled; tears stung into her eyes. Tubber hit her again, with his closed fist. Sparks leaped into life in her brain. Her eyes couldn't focus. Tubber was a mountain with a pitted white moon suspended over its crest. . . .

Collins' voice sliced through her foggy mind: "I'll get you for that, Tubber, so help me!"

Then she was looking up into Tubber's face again, her eyes clear. She said through clenched teeth:

"I never had any diamonds. I never—"

Tubber lifted his big left fist again, then let it down. He said softly: "You got guts, babe, but you'll talk, you'll talk."

Kay Merrill looked past him at Collins' rigid figure. Collins sat bent forward slightly, his face drained white, jaw muscles knotted. Pinky's eyes slid over Kay's body, and he licked his lips. He said shrilly:

"Why don't you take off her shoes and stockings, Tubber? Give her—"

"Yeah," Tubber cut in. "That's a swell idea. Take off your shoes and stockings, babe."

Kay Merrill stared up at him. She knew what this would mean; she remembered those burned matches at Retner's apartment, the blistered feet.

A sliver of ice seemed to slide along her spine. She *could* tell them where the diamonds were; she could even give them to Tubber now. But that would mean death for her and Collins. It would mean torture this way, and death too, but it would give them time. And time might give them a chance. . . .

She removed one high heel pump, then the other, dropping each with a little click on the floor. She peeled silk from slim, smoothly rounded legs. Pinky's breath made a sucking sound in the silence. Tubber changed the gun to his left hand, took a small package of matches from his pocket.

He scraped one, held the flaring

stick before her face, then blew out the flame. His emotionless gray eyes bored into Kay's. She watched him flip the burned matchstick away, watched its flight, watched it land on the cement floor. A scream caught in her throat; she pressed her lips together.

"Want to talk?" Tubber asked. "Or do I have to *make* you talk?"

She said nothing. Tubber scraped another match; it flared. He stooped, pointing the gun at her stomach. He moved the lighted match closer to her bare feet. She closed her eyes; she could feel the heat of the flame. Closer. . . . Then Collins' voice ripped the silence:

"Damn you, Tubber! I'll tell! I know where those stones are."

Tubber rose, dropped the match and stepped on it. "Ah-ha," he said softly, "I knew one of you'd come across. I had an idea the babe told you where the stones were, dick."

Kay Merrill opened her eyes, slowly. She looked down at her smooth, unblistered feet. Her eyes swiveled to Doug Collins' white face. Collins didn't know where those diamonds were; he couldn't know. His bluff would be penetrated in a few moments, and then—

"Okay, dick," Tubber was saying. "Where?"

Collins rose slowly, took a stride forward and picked up the two shoes Kay had dropped. Tubber watched him with narrowed eyes. The gun jutted from his fist, aimed at Collins' chest. Collins said quietly:

"They're in the heels, Tubber. You screw out the heels like this. . . ." He put one of the shoes under his arm, held the other out close to Tubber, and gripped the high heel with his free hand.

Tubber leaned forward slightly; the gun dropped an inch or two. For the first time, his eyes gleamed with interest, with avarice.

Then Collins swept the shoe up. The heel clicked against Tubber's chin. Tubber squealed; his gun blast-

ed. But Collins had smashed a fist against his gun arm, and the down-slanted gun sent a bullet drilling into the floor. Chipped cement spouted upward. Collins brought up a knee, rammed it into Tubber's stomach. Tubber's breath made a sudden *whoo-sh* of sound, and his gun dropped to the floor.

AT THE FIRST upward movement of the shoe, Kay had leaped forward, straight at Pinky. Pinky took a step toward Collins before he became aware of the slim body hurtling at him. He snapped a shot. The bullet barely missed the girl's side, and smashed the brick wall.

She was on him then, sending the revolver skidding across cement. Her small fists beat into his face. He lashed out, cursing shrilly. His right fist caught Kay on the jaw. She reeled, sagged to the floor.

Collins whirled, knuckles skinned slightly where they had contacted the fat man's face. Tubber lay on the floor, wheezing, blood running from his mouth and nose. Collins hit Pinky once, a hard-driven smash to the mouth.

Pinky staggered back against the small table and slid slowly to the floor, clutching at the table's edge. Collins picked up the two guns, took his own from Tubber's pocket, and helped Kay to her feet. She tried to smile up at him.

"You all right—Kay?"

"All right. The police'll be here. Those shots—"

Collins said: "I don't think so. This place must be soundproof, or nearly so. If they were afraid of noise Tubber would have gagged you."

Kay put on her shoes, stuffing her stockings into her coat pocket. She held a gun over Tubber and Pinky while Collins tied them with tow-rope. There had been no sound of police whistles.

When Tubber and Pinky were bound, Kay said: "Now what? Want me to get the police while you—"

"Not yet." Collins shook his head, slowly. "There are a few angles I want straightened first. About that diamond business—do you or don't you know where those stones are?"

Kay looked at him a long minute before replying. She'd tell him the truth later, she decided, when they were alone. She couldn't say anything in front of Tubber and Pinky. They'd relay the information to the police, and that would mean prison.

"No," she said, "I don't know where they are."

Collins' eyes became cynical then. "Okay," he said, "if that's the way you want it."

Kay said: "These two—they killed Retner. I'm sure of it."

Collins nodded. "I figure they went up to Retner's earlier, held him at gun-point and ransacked the place. When they couldn't find the stones, they tortured him. He must have told them you had the stones and were coming in with them on the bus, that they were in your traveling bag. Then they knifed him, rode out to Framingham, probably in an out-going bus, waited there and got into the bus with you. When they didn't find the stones in the bag, they waited outside Retner's and grabbed us."

"And the man behind the whole scheme," Kay said, "is Martin S. Norman."

Collins' eyes glinted. "How do you figure that?"

"It *must* be Norman. He was the only one, outside of Retner and myself, that knew about the deal. These two knew about the diamonds only because some one told them. That some one *had* to be Norman. He was certain Retner had the diamonds in the apartment, so he went up with Tubber and Pinky. When they tortured Retner, he had to tell them something to make them stop. So he told them I had the diamonds in my traveling bag. When Tubber and Pinky got off the bus, they probably went right through the terminal to Norman, and ripped the bag open right away.

"Norman decided to go up to Retner's then. He had to cover himself, because the police were bound to find out he had a deal on with Retner; I knew about that. And he had Tubber and Pinky wait outside to grab us. How's it sound?"

"Good," Collins said heartily. "The thing to do now is to get Norman and put the screws to him."

There was a sudden scraping sound at the other side of the garage. A voice clipped out: "Oh, no, Collins."

It was Norman; he'd come from another section of the warehouse, through a little door in the brick wall. There was a blue-steel automatic in his fist. He fired, running forward. The first bullet whammed into Collins' right shoulder, whipped him halfway around. He brought his left hand up, fired.

The shots blended in a deafening, rattling barrage. Norman stumbled; his automatic jumped out of his fist, skated across cement. He dropped to his knees slowly bent forward until he was flat, face-down.

Collins winced, looking at the blossoming stain at his shoulder. Kay said, white-faced: "Doug, you're shot!"

"I'm all right," he grinned wanly. "This isn't the worst I've had. You're—all right?"

"All right, Doug."

IN the small white-walled hospital room, Doug Collins sat propped up with pillows, and smiled at his visitor. Kay Merrill sat in a little chair beside the bed, smiling back at him. Her face was bruised; there was a square of adhesive tape on one cheek. She said after a moment:

"Norman's dead, but the police have signed confessions from Tubber and Pinky. Captain Anderson said it wouldn't have been any trouble convincing a jury, anyway. The only thing the police can't figure out is just why a nice girl like me would work for a man like Retner—whose reputation wasn't very good. . . . And by

the way, the warehouse belonged to Norman. He must have had it prearranged with Tubber and Pinky to come there after he left Retner's."

"Uh-huh," Collins said. "And how about those stones?"

Kay drew in a long breath. "I couldn't tell you about them back there. Tubber and Pinky would have heard and told the police. I'd have been arrested for handling stolen property. You see, it was Retner's idea when he made an out of town deal—to be sure everything was on the level first.

"When Retner made sure of Norman, he called me in—told me to take the diamonds with me, that the deal was going over. But even then he wasn't certain Norman was all right, so he called you into it; the first time he ever hired a private detective. Follow me?"

Collins nodded, and she continued: "Retner did that on all out of town deals—made sure of his man, then called me in with the gems. Three or four times he was slugged and robbed of gems by would-be customers. Last year he just missed being killed by a bullet when one of his 'customers' tried to shoot him to get a hundred thousand dollars' worth of pearls.

"Naturally, he couldn't kick to the police because the gems were always stolen property. So lately he had me work with him on every out of town deal. I usually stayed overnight at a hotel; he always hired an apartment—not so conspicuous, he claimed. I couldn't tell the police about the stones. I had to tell them I was merely working as Retner's secretary, and that Retner told Norman and the others I had the stones to stall them off. You see?"

Collins scowled a little. "But why'd you do that—be a messenger like that for a crook?"

She said quietly: "My brother Al once escaped prison in a small western town. He was serving a life term for murder. Al's a respected citizen

under another name now—family, business, all that. Exposure would ruin him. Somehow, Retner found out about his past. He held it over him, said if I acted as his agent, carried gems for him like that, he'd keep quiet. Retner wanted some one he could trust, preferably a woman. I *had* to work for him, for the sake of Al and his family."

Her brown eyes were bright and level on Collins'. "Al swears he wasn't guilty, that a band of killers framed him. I know that doesn't sound, well, just right. But if you knew Al, you'd have to believe him. . . . Now do you—do you understand why I did what I did?"

"Perfectly," Collins said warmly.

"But the stones—what about them?"

"I didn't know these were the Haskins jewels and that Retner had bought them. I thought they were stolen."

"But where the devil *are* the stones?"

"While they were taking the bullet out of you, I saw Captain Anderson. I'd just as soon not think about it, let the law handle the law's business." She moved over to the bed, straightened the pillow. "He has them now."

Collins grinned. "That's the right idea, Kay. Always let everybody handle their own business." He pulled her toward him, kissed her lips.

"This," he said, "is going to be my business."



STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Secret Agent X, published Quarterly at Springfield, Mass.
for October 1, 1938

State of New York } ss.
County of New York }

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared A. A. Wyn, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Publisher of the Secret Agent X and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

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A. A. WYN, Publisher.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 1st day of September, 1938.

JOSEPH F. HUGHES,

Notary Public

Queens Co. Clk's No. 3297, Reg. No. 7862

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Commission expires March 30, 1939.

Homicide Master

Gripping Novelette

By Norman A. Daniels

Author of "Homicide Heritage," etc.



Fate gave Headquarters Detective Max Stoddard a break when it put him on the murder scene at the crucial moment. But in her own way Fate made up for it, for Stoddard found himself up against a crime master. And the only way he could solve this murder was for him to—commit a murder himself.

A CAREFUL MURDERER can arrange his alibi, pick his victim and the most opportune place for the killing. But no murderer, regardless of his sagacity, can foresee the tricks of fate.

Which was why the killer couldn't know, that among the several thousand people who jammed the busy street, there would be a detective sauntering along, half a block behind the victim. Nor could he prophecy that a bright-eyed, red-cheeked boy

would be busily engaged in climbing a pole after an elusive baseball that was more loose strings than leather, and had caught on one of the footholds of the pole.

Kurt McAllister was in a hurry. He was worried, too, and it showed in the deeply etched lines of his face. He elbowed his way through the crowd, gave an annoyed grunt at three women who blocked the middle of the sidewalk, and stepped to the curb as he passed them by.

In something less than a tenth of a second later Kurt McAllister floundered around in the gutter. But not for long. A man with a bullet through the side of his head—a big bullet fired from a forty-four—doesn't take long in dying.

Detective Max Stoddard heard the single shot, vivid and distinct above the roar of traffic. He saw Kurt McAllister drop into the gutter and he broke into a run. There was a crowd around the dead man, a stunned crowd that looked with gaping mouths at the bloody mess. Stoddard knelt, slipped a hand beneath McAllister's vest and shirt. There was no heart beat.

Fate's second little gesture appeared by dint of squirming through the legs of the crowd. It was the boy who had climbed the pole after his baseball. His cheeks were even redder, his eyes were brighter. He tugged at the detective's sleeve.

"Hey, mister cop," he said. "Mister cop. I saw him do it. I saw him."

Stoddard raised his head. "Say that again."

The boy pointed excitedly to the pole. His baseball, forgotten now, still dangled from one of its loose strings.

"I was up there—after my ball. I saw the guy who did it. I saw him point a big gun. He was in a car."

"What's your name?" Stoddard asked. "And where do you live?"

"I'm Russell Duane. I live with my mommy near the ninth precinct. That's how I knew you was a cop, mister. Last week I saw you bring in

two guys. They fought like everything—remember?"

Stoddard nodded. "I remember. Now look here, sonny. This is no day dream? You're not playing cops and robbers?"

"No sir," Russell answered promptly. "I saw the man who did it. He was—"

"Wait," Stoddard held up his hand. "Stay on the curb, Russ, and I'll be with you in a minute. If anybody asks you any questions, don't answer."

STODDARD saw an expensive, hand-tooled leather wallet protruding from the dead man's pocket. Not having any great compunctions about breaking regulations, Stoddard eased it out of the pocket and looked inside.

"McAllister," he said softly. "This is going to make one powerful stench. He's big—*was* big—and he'll make news."

Two harness bulls squeezed through the crowd. Stoddard looked up. "Hello, Ross. Watch the stiff, will you? I got a witness waiting to talk. Murphy—send for the coroner, the morgue wagon and the homicide boys. Not that I need 'em, but they get sore if you leave 'em out."

Stoddard peered around searching for the boy. There was no sign of him, and Stoddard felt a sinking sensation near the pit of his stomach.

"Anybody see that kid?" he demanded. "The one who spoke to me?" Nobody had. Stoddard said: "Damn! The little runt beat it for home."

He hopped a taxi, grateful for the instinct that had urged him to inquire the boy's name and address. Russell's mother became alarmed when Stoddard showed his badge.

"Nope," Stoddard said. "He hasn't done a thing, ma'am—just saw a guy bump—killed. Saw the murderer, too, so your little boy is going to get some publicity. I'll wait until he comes home."

"You don't think," the mother

asked with that strange sense of foreboding that mothers can have, "Russ was—was taken away by some friends of the murderer?"

Outwardly Stoddard scoffed at the idea. But the possibility had occurred to him. As the minutes rolled by he became worried. He sat at the kitchen table, idly tracing several weird-colored prints, about the size of a postage stamp, emblazoned on the white enamel surface of the table.

Mrs. Duane smiled a trifle tremulously. "Russ did that. Those transfers I mean. He's forever pasting them all over everything. His pockets are full of them. Gets them from a little confectionery store across the street. They're bits of tissue paper that you wet, paste down on some flat object and the color comes off."

Stoddard knew what she meant. He had used them when he was a boy. They sold about a dozen for a penny and provided no little sport for kids.

An hour went by. Mrs. Stoddard suddenly put down a potato she had been peeling. "Something has happened to Russ," she cried and walked up and down the floor nervously. "Mr. Stoddard, do you think he might be waiting at police headquarters?"

Stoddard headed for the telephone. But there was no boy waiting at headquarters, any of the precincts or the D.A.'s office. Russell Duane had dropped off the face of the earth.

Stoddard left a weeping woman and strode away with grim determination in his soul. Somebody had murdered Kurt McAllister; and now little Russell Duane was missing. Stoddard knew McAllister was a rich, influential man who had been wholly occupied with his business and minded no one else's.

Vengeance, jealousy could most likely be discarded as motives. Therefore the killer probably committed his crime for gain. Who'd know the person or persons most likely to profit by his death? McAllister's lawyer of course.

Stoddard crossed the street from

the boy's house and entered the confectionery store. A display of the transfers caught his eye, and he bought a strip of them. Then he popped into the phone booth and called the dead man's office. A confidential secretary answered his question between sobs. Stoddard used some more taxpayer's money to reach the lawyer's offices.

"I'm a cop and I want to see Attorney Hanneman," he told the blonde guardian of the outer office. "And I want to see him right away, baby, so don't stall me. I'm not selling books."

Attorney Hanneman turned out to be a squat, diffident little man eager to answer questions—after he had an hour to mull over each one.

". . . And, as I have previously stated," he told Stoddard with annoying detail, "Kurt McAllister's death benefits only two persons. His nephew Jed Klein and his business partner Brule Gardner. I—I hope you arrest his nephew. I don't like the little pip-squeak."

Stoddard made a few notes. "The nephew inherits the estate. The business partner has an agreement by which the death of either partner leaves the entire business in the hands of the survivor. Thanks, counselor. I'll see both of 'em."

He phoned headquarters from outside on a forlorn hope. No, there had been no word of Russ Duane. He called the boy's mother and received a tearful account of what she believed had happened to him. Stoddard needed no such account. He had plenty of ideas of his own, and none of them was very pleasant.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, he reasoned that the murderer, driving along a crowded thoroughfare, would have a difficult job spotting his victim, what with the streets so jammed and the curb lined with cars. Therefore, it was probable that the killer had a finger man—one who would watch for the killer's car and then

point out the whereabouts of the victim.

Stoddard was using a squad car in getting around. He drove out to Kurt McAllister's home and learned absolutely nothing except that the servants were in a frenzy over losing their jobs. McAllister had been a bachelor. One other item was pounded home by the valet and the contrite chauffeur. Jed Klein, who was the dead man's nephew, seemed to be some variety of double-dyed, twin-striped skunk.

Jed Klein lived alone in a neat little bachelor apartment. He wasn't there to greet Stoddard, but the big detective got into the apartment without trouble. Burglars frequently carry some pretty classy master keys and where burglars go, keys aren't allowed, so Stoddard had accumulated a stack that would open the United States Mint.

He looked around the apartment. There was an alarm clock on a dresser—the kind you wind. It was stopped. There was nothing else in any way significant. Stoddard gave up with a grunt and returned to his car. Klein hadn't been seen for hours, according to the building superintendent who also made a significant statement.

"Say, now that his miserly uncle is dead, he'll get himself a lot of jack, huh? That'll be good, because he owes me two and a half months rent."

Brule Gardner's house was something else again. As befitting the business partner of the dead Kurt McAllister, Gardner evidently lived up to his position. His home was one of those things that look like a movie set. Spanish in design with sloping roofs, about ten little porches and vines that climbed all over the place. Stoddard pushed the door buzzer hopefully.

A big lug let him in. He was dressed in the trousers and puttees of a chauffeur, but he wore a loose morning coat. The combination was slightly bizarre. Stoddard guessed he

was about two-fifty in weight and not one ounce of that was superfluous.

"You gotta badge?" this husky guardian of the house demanded. "You ain't no nosey reporter tryin' to muscle in on the boss?"

"Nix, sweetheart," Stoddard flashed his badge. "This is the McCoy and if you don't believe it, tell me I can't get in."

The combination chauffeur-butler scowled blackly and went away. When he came back, he jerked his thumb over his shoulder to indicate a room off the big hallway. Stoddard grinned at him and walked in.

Brule Gardner rose from behind a desk littered with papers. He extended a good sized mitt.

"I thought one of you detectives would get here sooner or later. Too bad about Kurt. We were partners for a good many years. Who do you suppose killed him?"

Stoddard crossed his legs and looked at Gardner. He saw a man of about forty with a wide, handsome face and a resolute chin. Gardner was nobody to fool with, the detective realized.

"You're asking a question," Stoddard said calmly, "and I'm giving you an honest answer. Two people served to gain by McAllister's death. He hadn't an enemy in the world and he gave away more money than was good for his bank account. Jed Klein stands to come into his uncle's fortune. You—"

Gardner grinned. "I know, I take over the business. You suspect me then? Maybe it's a good idea. A detective must suspect everyone. As you say, McAllister had no enemies. He was scrupulously honest in business, owed nobody a cent, never antagonized any one man or group of men. He supported charities, went to bed at nine-thirty, and he never took a drink in his life. See what I'm getting at? It has to be either myself or Jed Klein who murdered him."

"Did you?" Stoddard asked frankly.

GARDNER shrugged. "Sorry," he said crisply, "I didn't do it. Now, let me get on. In Jed Klein you have the perfect wanton murderer. You've never met Klein, but he's some particularly low breed of rat. He'd cheat his own grandmother if there was a nickel's profit in it for him. He gambles and welches on his losses. His tongue is downright nasty and he has a rotten disposition. There, officer, is your typical picture of a murderer."

Stoddard digested that for a moment. He was looking at the tip of his shoe when he spoke again.

"It's all interesting, Mr. Gardner, but one thing I question. How do you know I haven't seen Jed Klein? You made a rather positive statement there."

Gardner chuckled. "Smart, aren't you, officer? And I've gone through life believing detectives get by only through sheer luck. I admit I made such a statement, but I did so without intention. You may even have Klein in a nice little cell for all I know."

Stoddard didn't smile at that one. He just looked across Gardner's desk and spoke as calmly as though he was chatting at lunch with a friend.

"Supposing, Mr. Gardner, that I tell you McAllister was alive when I reached his side? Suppose he was able to talk—just a few words perhaps, but enough?"

Gardner threw back his head and laughed. "Supposing he did talk," he chuckled. "That would make him a miracle man. You're not tricking me, officer. Men don't talk with a bullet through their brains."

Stoddard leaned forward. His hat was in his lap, one hand was also hidden beneath it. "But I did trick you, Gardner. Except for a few witnesses, only the murderer would know McAllister died by a bullet crashing through his head."

Gardner threw back his head and laughed. "Wrong again, officer. It so happens that Big John—my chauff-

feur—was walking along the street at the time of the murder. He is, as you may have noticed, a rather tall man. By looking over the heads of the crowd he saw where poor McAllister had been shot. Naturally he told me about it. And I can prove Big John was there, of course."

"Of course," Stoddard agreed. "I noticed him myself. You're clever, Mr. Gardner."

"Clever?" Gardner chuckled. "Thanks, officer, but it isn't that. A man who has nothing to hide can't lose by telling the truth."

"Yeah," Stoddard agreed, "that's right. Then why don't you tell the truth? Look here, Gardner, a little boy saw that murder and can identify the killer. He disappeared. Your chauffeur was quite handy and in a position to snatch that boy. What did you do with him?"

"You're crazy," Gardner countered suavely. "I don't know a thing about a boy witness."

"No?" Stoddard arose and pointed to the surface of Gardner's desk. There was a transfer print emblazoned on it. "See that? The kid had a pocket full of transfers. You had him taken here, but the boy was wide awake. He slapped one of those on the desk as a clue. I can prove he had plenty of them and I'm betting you can't prove how that transfer got on your desk."

Gardner leaned back, a little sadly it seemed. When he spoke, it wasn't to Stoddard but to Big John who had slipped quietly into the room and stood directly behind the detective with a heavy gun in his fist.

"Damn you, Big John, I told you to be sure the boy left no traces of his presence. We took those damned transfers out of his pocket, but the little devil must have *concealed one in his hand.*"

BIG JOHN grunted. "What's the difference, boss. We rub out this dick—toss him some place, and who's gonna be wise? I'll wipe the crazy

picture off the desk right away."

Gardner shook his head. "No, I've a better plan. By the way, officer, stop fidgeting with your hat. I know you have a gun concealed under it, but Big John also has a gun—and it's aimed at you.

Stoddard looked around at Big John, let the gun be taken from him.

"Now," he asked, "what?"

Gardner spread his hands in an eloquent gesture. "You'll admit I'm not a typical looking murderer. Well, Jed Klein is. Now, I've a proposition—"

"Proposition be damned," Stoddard yelled. "Where's that kid? Talk—damn you!"

Gardner lost his smile. He leaned back in his swivel chair and looked up at the beefy face of his servant. "Hear the man talk, Big John. Stoddard, I'm surprised at you. You're reverting to a movie type detective." He leaned forward and his eyes narrowed. "I said I had a proposition. Will you listen?"

Stoddard relaxed. "Go ahead. But remember—the kid goes free. He's got nothing to do with your propositions. Furthermore, I want positive proof the boy is alive."

Gardner contemplated the tip of a fresh cigar. "Big John will get that evidence—immediately. He'll have to leave the house because the boy is some distance away. It may take an hour."

"You gonna keep him covered, boss?" Big John asked and then he added hopefully: "Lemme smack him one so he'll be nice and quiet."

"Don't be silly, Big John," Gardner said. "You go to the boy and bring back his cap. You might have him write a little note also—so our friend will be completely satisfied."

"Okay," Big John agreed doubtfully. "I'll leave the roscoe, huh?"

"It isn't necessary. Stoddard won't try to take me to headquarters, because if he does—then he'll have to take you, too. It would be sad if no

one reached the boy. He'd starve. Big John and I won't tell where he is because without him you've no case, neither murder nor kidnapping."

Stoddard found himself at an utter loss for words. He'd never encountered a criminal so blasé, so cocky and self-confident as this man. In fact Stoddard knew damned well he was far more jittery than Gardner.

"Want to talk about things while we wait?" Stoddard asked. "Why you killed McAllister might be interesting."

Gardner spread his hands on the desk top. "Why not? McAllister was too damned righteous. Our agreement was that money could not be appropriated without the consent of the other partner. McAllister was all for building up a big reserve. Me—I'm more practical.

"So—well, I helped myself. McAllister audited the books, found a beautiful shortage and was on his way to the police when I—er—stopped him. If I'd had more time, I could have arranged things more satisfactorily, but McAllister was determined to get a warrant. It was too bad you had to see Big John."

Stoddard smiled thinly. "I didn't. That was sheer guesswork, but it turned out rather well. What's the deal, Gardner? What do you want to let Russ Duane go home to his mother?"

"Now you're talking," Gardner said with smug satisfaction. "Of course I realize you must arrest some one, but I've provided for that. Klein is your man. You can testify that he killed McAllister to get his fortune. It will benefit me because then no audit will be made of the firm's books as might be done if he came into the fortune and insisted on it. Klein is no good—and he's a perfect killer for you. Everything is fixed. You throw the blame on him, I'll let the boy go free, and we'll part friends. Isn't that sensible, officer?"

"It's insane," Stoddard snapped. "I'd look fine putting an innocent man

on the witness stand. He'll deny everything and probably prove a complete alibi."

"**B**UT YOU won't put him on the stand," Gardner said smoothly. "That won't be necessary. You'll kill him, Stoddard. You'll shoot him down in self defense. Now, listen! The gun is hidden in Klein's apartment. I'll tell you where. He had the motive and the temperament. I'll swear he threatened to kill McAllister before. He has no alibi—I'm convinced of that."

"It's an open and shut case. An out for you, the means of saving a boy's life and my own personal safety. You'll never talk—I've arranged things so the boy believes Klein is the man who kidnapped him, and he'll back up your story. I'll be quite content to keep my mouth shut. Come, man, think it over."

"I am," Stoddard said in a tired voice. "I kill an innocent man, stigmatize his memory with the name murderer so you can go scot free. In return I have a boy's life. Gardner, you're making things difficult for me."

"I'm simplifying them," Gardner insisted. "You'll crack the case, kill the murderer and reap the applause of a city. I'll staunchly maintain you should have a promotion. I'll even recompense you if that's necessary."

Stoddard didn't reply. Mechanically he accepted one of Gardner's cigars. Big John returned more than an hour after he left. Stoddard looked him over carefully. Big John's shoes and the bottoms of his puttees were covered with black mud, wet mud.

He flung Russ Duane's cap on the desk and dropped a soiled piece of paper on it. Stoddard read the brief note. It was in a round, childish hand.

I met the detective from the Ninth precinct when the man was murdered. My ball was up in the pole. I went up to get it and I saw the man in the car with a gun. And I'm terrible hungry. Please help me and tell mommy I'll be home.

"Satisfied?" Gardner asked. "If the writing appears a bit odd, it's because the lad is blindfolded. Never do to let him see us, you know."

Stoddard rose, his eyes narrow, his face gone hard as granite. "You," he said, "are the rottenest thing in creation. By using this boy as a pawn, you hope to force me into killing a man to save your own skin. It looks as though I'll be forced to do it, but—you'll wait, Stoddard. You'll wait until I'm ready to go through with it."

Big John bent down and whispered hoarsely: "Lemme give him a lesson, boss. One little smack, huh, boss?"

"Don't be silly, Big John," Gardner said. "Why harm him? He's going to work with us. He's going to think it over first. Do I object? Of course I don't, because I'm humane and above all a gentleman. You may have all the time you wish to think it over, Stoddard. I have but one suggestion. That boy is hungry now. I don't think it would be long before he'd starve to death. Shall we say—tomorrow?"

"No, damn you," Stoddard thundered. "As soon as I'm certain you're not bluffing about Jed Klein, I'll be back. I want to be sure he has no alibi. It's now," he looked at his watch, "nine-thirty. I'll be back about midnight. If I'm satisfied I'll go through with it, although I can't see how I'm going to shoot down a man in cold blood—a harmless cuss who can't even fight back."

"But you'll do it," Gardner smiled. "You'll do it to save the life of that boy. A life for a life—that's an ancient creed, one to be respected."

"Yeah. Only you're making it two lives for one. Don't forget McAllister. He's cooling off on a morgue slab right now."

STODDARD flung himself out of the house, cursing every step. His mind was a jumble, his conscience telling him to do two different things. He tried to reason things out as he

drove slowly to headquarters. Telling his superiors wouldn't help because they'd grab Gardner, sweat him. And Stoddard knew Gardner wouldn't talk. Neither would that hulk of a chauffeur. They held all the cards and knew it.

Finally Stoddard turned into a cool, quiet park and stopped. He shoved his hat back, buried his head in his hands and fought to consider the question from all angles.

Twenty minutes later he knew there was but one answer. He had to kill Jed Klein! The boy's life was far more valuable. Gardner was a killer, but not a type to murder indiscriminately. He'd probably never kill another person. It wasn't like turning some drug-soaked wretch loose on the world. Gardner was satisfied with his lot, successful, polished and on the surface an asset to any community.

If only there were some way out. Some way to save both the boy and Klein—and at the same time corner this beast who killed and then proclaimed himself a perfect gentleman.

Stoddard's head ached and he walked into headquarters with heavy steps. He spent about half an hour there, most of the time in the police laboratories. Then he visited city hall, talked a watchman into letting him examine public works records. He made copious notes, drew diagrams and floundered around until eleven o'clock.

But when he finished, Stoddard possessed one thing. Hope! Forlorn, insignificant, perhaps, but still hope. He roused the police commissioner out of bed, told him an incredible story.

At five minutes after twelve Stoddard drew up before Gardner's house. Big John greeted him with a scowl of hatred and made half a pass at his jaw. Stoddard didn't duck the blow, didn't even express his contempt. He moved with laggardly steps. His face was drawn, his hands tightly clenched at his sides.

Gardner was sipping Scotch. He

poured Stoddard a husky shot and the detective downed it gratefully.

"I thought you'd need something to stiffen you up," Stoddard smiled. "Have another? And are you ready to go through with this thing?"

Gardner swallowed the second drink and felt better. "I'm ready. One thing I insist upon. I must see that boy. Must be sure he is alive. Oh, you can blindfold me—put me in a box or a sack or anything. But I must see that he is all right. I'm not buying any pig in a poke—not at your price. Then you and your stooge must remain within my sight until this is—is over with."

"Agreed." Gardner stood up and extended his hand. Stoddard didn't look at it and Gardner grinned, stuck it in his trouser pocket. "We'll get on with it then. Always remember, officer, when a boy of about ten gets hungry, he becomes ravished. I wouldn't like to see him starve any more than you would."

"How do we go there? In my car? It doesn't make any difference."

Big John stormed into the house. "He wasn't tailed, chief. Ain't nobody on the street."

"Get the big roll of adhesive from the medicine chest," Gardner ordered. "Bring it here. We're taking this officer to see the boy."

Big John scowled. "Ain't that takin' a big chance, boss? What if he's got some trick?"

"He has no trick. Do as I say, and Big John—keep in mind the fact that I know you killed a man yourself. Obey my orders and don't question them."

Big John moved away, muttering something about cops being tricky. He returned, and Gardner plastered strips of adhesive across Stoddard's eyes. He surveyed the detective from all angles before he was satisfied that it was impossible for him to see.

"The car, Big John," Gardner snapped. "And be sure there is fuel enough to reach the boy's hiding place and back."

GARDNER led Stoddard out the back door to the garage. Stoddard maintained a strict silence as he stumbled along, clinging to Gardner's arm. He was helped into the tonneau of a car with a powerful motor. It rolled out of the estate, struck the highway and, Stoddard knew, turned north.

Then he lost all sense of direction. The car weaved in and out of traffic, turned scores of corners, rolled through heavy traffic, picked up speed on a level, quiet highway, threaded streets near the river front.

When the car finally turned very sharply, bounded over a curb and the tires crunched against dirt, Stoddard knew they were at their destination.

Gardner touched his arm. "We're here, officer. Before we go to see the boy, I must insist upon searching you. Possibly you have concentrated food for the lad and—I don't want him fed so that you can stall this thing any longer. You don't object?"

"Why should I?" Stoddard raised his arms and let Gardner search him carefully.

"Good," Gardner said. "I've taken your gun—just in case you get foolish notions when you see the boy. Odd, isn't it—and funny too—when you think about it. Here I am, a confessed murderer, riding around with a policeman and in no danger of arrest."

"Yeah," Stoddard grunted, "very funny."

Gardner laughed at the irony in Stoddard's voice. He helped him out of the car, piloted him across what seemed to be half a mile of uneven terrain, although Stoddard had an idea he was being led around in circles. Finally he was told to duck his head.

They entered some kind of a place where their voices echoed dully. There was a moist smell in the air, and Stoddard felt his shoes sinking in mud. He climbed down an iron ladder to more mud.

Finally Gardner stopped him and began peeling off the adhesive. "I'll provide you with a flashlight, Stoddard. You will walk straight ahead until you come to a metal door. Open it and inside you'll find the boy. He's quite safe. Neither I nor Big John will accompany you, for we don't wish the boy to see or hear us. He has seen only one man—Jed Klein—and he firmly believes Klein is the man who kidnaped him."

"How'd you work that?" Stoddard inquired while the adhesive was slowly taken off. "Big John snatched him right in the middle of the crowd, didn't he?"

Big John laughed. "I snatched the kid all right, but me—I know how to do it. He didn't see me and he never knew what happened, get it?"

Stoddard got it when he saw the boy. Russ was tied up in a deep, fairly comfortable chair. That was the only stick of furniture in the place, and Stoddard guessed it was some kind of a work shop. For there was a long, worm-eaten bench on one side of the small room, a few rusted tools in a corner and nothing else. Russ was blindfolded with pads of cotton held in place by adhesive.

Stoddard turned the flash on him and grimaced. Big John had kidnaped the lad effectively all right. There was a livid bruise on Russ's chin where he'd been struck a vicious blow—knocked unconscious.

Stoddard managed a tight smile. "This is Stoddard—the detective. Don't worry, Russ. Everything is going to be all right. Feel good?"

"I'm hungry," Russ said. "Please, Mr. Policeman—take me back to mommy. It's dark with this on my eyes, and there are things running around on the floor. I been awful scared."

"I can't take you out right away, Russ," Stoddard said gently. "You'll have to be brave a few minutes longer. Did you see the man who took you here?"

"Yes, I saw him. Once they didn't

tie up my eyes. He's a skinny man and I don't like him. He—he looked in at me and I could see his face. I'll know him again."

"Was he the man who fired the shot from the car?" Stoddard asked softly.

"I—I think so. I—I ain't sure, but I think so. When can I go back to mommy?"

"In a little while. Now keep your chin up, you won't have to wait long. I'll get the man who kidnaped you first so he can't get away and come back here. We'll make a little game of it, eh? Now with your help it will be easy. Five minutes after I leave, you tell stories to yourself. Talk all the time and talk as loud as you can."

"But nobody can hear me," Russ protested. "I hollered like everything."

"Perhaps this time some one will hear you, and you'll be helping me. Remember—wait five minutes and then talk loud. And don't worry. I'll be back soon. Your mommy wants you to be a brave boy. You see, Russ, she's helping us, too."

"Okay. I'll do it, only don't be long, will ya?"

S TODDARD patted his head and wished he might untie him, but Gardner would undoubtedly take a good look before he left. Stoddard backed out of the tiny room. Gardner took his arm, led him away a few feet.

"Watch him, Big John," he ordered. "I just want to be sure he didn't untie the boy."

He returned in two minutes. "Your confidence in me, officer, is deeply appreciated. I thought you might provide the boy with a knife, or partially slit his bonds. Now—if you don't mind."

Stoddard permitted more adhesive to be slapped across his eyes. He was returned to the car and the long winding ride began again. Gardner replaced Stoddard's gun in its holster.

"This time," Gardner said, "I'm

taking you to another place—where I've got Klein tied up. I imagine he'll be a trifle hungry, too, but that won't worry him much longer. I've got him in an old house that his uncle and I own. He's been there before, and it will be quite logical for him to be holed up there."

The ride took even longer than the first half of it. Stoddard's nerves were on edge. He breathed heavily and his fingers were clenched in fists so tight that they hurt.

Gardner began stripping off the adhesive. "There's no advantage in keeping the location of this place a secret," he said. "You can say you followed the trail here on a hunch, discovered Klein and he opened fire on you. We'll make that seem authentic with a couple of bullets in the walls. The place is rather well isolated so the shots won't be heard."

Stoddard looked around when the adhesive was off. He knew where he was. Carlin Manor had been an inspired suburban development that failed miserably. Ghosts of houses studded the section, all of them gloomy and dark.

Gardner snapped an order to Big John, and they parked the car deep down a driveway where it couldn't be seen by anyone passing by. Not that anyone would—the suburb was entirely deserted, but Gardner was taking no chances.

As they walked along, Big John mumbled: "We oughta polish this tramp off, boss. I don't trust cops none."

Stoddard stopped dead and frowned. "That does sound like a logical idea, Gardner. What assurance have I that you won't make this look like Klein opened fire and killed me, but I got in a shot before I died?"

"You have none," Gardner assured him, "except my word, which I promise will be kept. You've acted wisely, I hold nothing against you and I have no desire to see you die. Furthermore, it will be advantageous for me if you live, because then no deeper

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investigation of McAllister's death will ever be made. You'll see to that."

Stoddard said: "Let's get on with it. The sooner this is over, the better I'll like it."

They turned into an uneven cement walk leading to a big house. The front door was locked, but Gardner opened it, being very careful not to brush against anything. They stepped into the place and Gardner drew on gloves. Big John already wore them.

"He's upstairs—tied to a bed," Gardner explained. "I'll lead the way." He used a flashlight that he had taped so that the ray of light was small and impossible to be noticed outside. They turned into a room that smelled musty. Bed springs squeaked and Gardner turned the light on the man who was firmly tied to the bare springs.

KLEIN'S eyes were alight with a horrible fear. Stoddard looked at him dispassionately. Klein was the type whose physical appearance indicates cowardice and the characteristics of a man who'd kill when cornered. He was effectively gagged.

Gardner handed the flashlight to Big John. "Keep it trained on Klein," he ordered crisply. His voice was a little tense now, some of his finesse gone.

"We're ready," he told Stoddard. "Finish him first, then we'll arrange the scenic effects for your benefit. Shoot him between the eyes, Stoddard. It's highly effective and we must take no chances."

Stoddard drew his gun slowly. Gardner suddenly seized it. "Don't be alarmed," he smiled tightly. "I'm just going to make certain this won't be bungled. You may have substituted blank cartridges—or a light charge of powder. I've provided myself with fresh bullets. I'll remove yours and insert mine."

"Have it your own way," Stoddard snapped, "but hurry. That poor devil on the bed knows what's going to happen."

Gardner broke the breech of Stoddard's gun and ejected the bullets. He stowed these carefully away, replaced them with fresh slugs, clicked the breech back in place and handed the gun to Stoddard.

"Get on with it," he ordered.

Stoddard accepted the gun. His face was perfectly white, his hands shaking. Big John took up a position near the door, keeping the thin ray of the flash on the doomed man. Klein, eyes bulging, strained and tugged at his bonds with renewed fury born of despair.

Stoddard took a long breath. He raised the gun, sighted it—and then shuddered. He lowered the weapon.

"I can't do it," he said. "Regardless of everything else—the boy who will starve, his mother who will grieve. I can't do it, Gardner. I tell you I can't."

Gardner swore and jerked the gun from Stoddard's hand. "You're a white livered example of a man," he snapped. "Here, stand back. I'll kill him. Only your prints will be on the gun when it's over. It doesn't make much difference who actually pulls the trigger."

Coolly he moved forward until he was about six feet from the doomed man. He pointed the gun slowly, centered its sights directly between Klein's eyes and slowly pressed the trigger.

There was a tremendous roar. The light in Big John's hand jerked from the shock of the explosion. Some one screamed. Stoddard moved with all the speed and precision at his command. He stepped close to Big John and swung a mighty blow.

It had plenty of steam behind it and hate and fury to bolster it as well. Big John caught the punch on the point of the chin. He reeled backward. The flash dropped to the floor. His right hand, seeking to pull a gun, fell limply away.

Stoddard scooped up the flash. He turned its ray toward Gardner and Klein. Gardner was half bent over,

groaning with pain, holding his right hand. Parts of the gun lay on the floor. Klein had passed out.

Stoddard seized Gardner, shoved him against a wall and rapidly searched him. He extracted a small gun from a holster sewed to the lining of his coat, dropped this into his own pocket and drew out handcuffs. He draped one over Gardner's left wrist, clamped the other on Big John.

Gardner looked at him. "You'll be sorry for this, Stoddard. That was a dirty trick."

"Sure it was," Stoddard admitted cheerfully. "But so was yours. That gun was a .38. All I did was to pare down a .44 lead slug and jam it into the barrel of the .38 and—

"Well you saw the results—or should I say, felt them. Your hand badly hurt?"

"What does that matter?" Gardner cried. "And what do you intend doing? Don't forget, there's a boy who'll starve. You'll never find that hiding place."

"I won't have to," Stoddard laughed happily. "By this time Russ is in his mother's arms. Blame Big John, Gardner. He gave your little plan away?"

"Big John?" Gardner gaped.

"RIGHT. When you sent him to get Russ' cap and the note he wrote, Big John was gone well over an hour, indicating that he'd traveled quite some distance. Yet, when he came into the house, his shoes and puttees were covered with mud—and it was plenty wet.

"If he'd visited some underground hiding place where the boy was secreted—that mud had a lot of time to dry before he reached your house. If, he had been any great distance—which he hadn't. The wet mud indicated he had been only a short distance away, and the color of the mud indicated that it was silt."

"You're mad," Gardner said, but

there was no conviction in his voice.

"No, really I'm not. I figured that Big John had been underground. Where else would there be wet, viscous mud in the middle of a great city? So I checked up a bit. I found plans showing an old disused sewer that ran directly beneath your estate. While you and Big John took me for that long joy ride, men from headquarters surrounded your estate.

"They watched us descend into the sewer through some small tool building or other you had rigged up. They waited until we left. Russ had orders to talk loudly so his voice would lead the searching party on. I came with you alone, taking my own chances on saving Klein's skin. I had to find him too, you see."

Gardner shivered. "Yes—yes, I do see. I—I suppose there isn't anything else."

Stoddard grinned. He removed his hat, turned back the sweatband and removed a strip of colored tissue paper. Gravely he licked several of the transfer stamps and slapped them across Gardner's forehead.

"You look better now," he said. "You're carrying around a duplicate of the trap I set for you. That transfer on your desk—Russ didn't put it there. I did! If you hadn't fallen for it, I'd have found Klein and tried the same thing on him. The real killer knew Russ had those things in his pockets. Neat, eh?"

Gardner's teeth were chattering. "Very," he got out. "Sh—shall we go now?"

Stoddard nodded. "I'm afraid it's one of your last rides, Gardner. Pretty soon we'll be seeing how a gentleman murderer dies."

Gardner drew himself up a little, with supreme effort. "I'll die like a gentleman," he promised. "I've lived like one, took my own chances and I'll go out the same way."

Stoddard said softly: "You know—I don't think you will."

Memo for Murder

By Leo Stalnak

Chief of Detectives York had got where he was because he was good. He knew how to handle a murder case. And now he had to use that knowledge to track down the murderer of the girl in Room 223—with all signs pointing to York's brother, a rookie cop.

THE toughest jolt in all my years on the force came when I saw my kid brother's handwriting on that cheap rooming-house register, knowing he was not married.

Steve York and Wife

Naturally, I knew my own brother's signature. There it was, with the room number opposite—223. The room where the girl's body had been found!

Sergeant Argust was at my right shoulder, peering searchingly. I leafed the page over suddenly, to prevent him from seeing what I had seen. But I don't think I was quick enough. I felt his startled gaze boring into me. I was too sick to look up.



I fumbled with the register, like I was checking over names several days back. But there was no sense in that, and besides my fingers were shaking too much. I got the book shut and stuck it under my arm.

"I'm taking your register," I said to the bald, stooped proprietor, but I didn't know what I was going to do with it.

He blinked twice, and gaped after me wordlessly.

"Come on, Art," I snapped to Sergeant Argust. "Let's go up and take a look at the business in 223."

I felt rotten. I caught him watching me from the tail of his eye as we made for the stairs. I stumbled on the first step. Then I bawled him out.

Argust narrowed his eyes quizzically. "You're not feeling well, are you chief?"

I must have been white enough, but I couldn't make out just what he meant by that crack, the way he said it.

Art Argust wasn't especially fond of me. I knew he felt he should have been appointed chief of detectives instead of me a year ago. And if Councilman Velz could have had his way, Argust would have been appointed. Right now, with Velz and his henchmen continually riding me, I knew I wasn't setting so tight with the mayor. So I didn't need Argust pulling against me.

That smug, complacent look on Argust's square face told me he knew what was in the register. Still, I had a feeling Argust would stick to a member of the force. My kid brother, Steve, was a rookie cop—and a good one. He lived with me. But he didn't come home last night, for some unexplained reason. Right now it looked as if the reason was in room 223—but I couldn't believe it.

GROTON, from prowler car fifty-two, was on guard at the door to the murder room. He looked at me as if he was watching a walking

ghost when I came up. I felt twice as bad as I looked.

I threw a nervous glance about the cheaply furnished bedroom before I gave much attention to the corpse. Then I breathed again. I saw nothing I thought belonged to Steve.

Doors to adjoining rooms on either side were locked. The windows opened to a fire escape. The girl's body, half-dressed, was in a contorted heap on the worn carpet by a bed that hadn't been slept in. One bullet wound in the chest. There had been a struggle, a short one at least. Close beside the body was the gun and a wet towel that had been wrapped around the barrel when it blasted.

I had seen that blonde before, somewhere. She was around twenty, not bad looking, a little too hard around the mouth. *Steve York and wife!* There was no earthly reason why Steve should pull any sort of a stunt with a woman. He stood a fair chance to marry the mayor's daughter—until this happened!

Then into my reeling brain rushed a thought that left me empty, all gone inside. I suddenly wanted to get on a telephone.

For Argust's benefit I began a close inspection of things. I guessed the M. E. and Prints and Pix would be here in ten minutes. They were. I stayed long enough to make sure they didn't get anything important; then I gave Argust some instructions.

"I'm leaving you in charge here, Art. Finish up. I'm going to do some telephoning."

The register was still under my arm. I didn't like the gimlet stare he gave me nor the inflection in his voice when he replied: "Okay, chief."

I realized he knew exactly what I intended to do.

At headquarters I locked the register in my safe. "Has Steve come in yet?" I inquired, about as nonchalantly as a fellow, whose brother had stepped into a death rap, could possibly speak.

The desk sergeant nodded and swiveled in his chair so he could look me straight in the face. "But he went right out again," he added. "Didn't say where he was goin'."

I slid into the chair at my desk, to think. I needed a little rest! Was Steve trying to dodge me? "Did Steve leave any message?" I queried. If I looked as screwy as my voice sounded, no wonder he kept staring at me.

"Didn't open his mouth."

I reached for the telephone.

"And I'd like to take a look at the other fellow," the desk sergeant added.

My hand froze motionless on the receiver. "You mean—he'd been in a fight?"

"Mighta run against a door in the dark."

I went cold and dizzy. My thinking faculties wouldn't function for a full minute. If I didn't arrest Steve, some one else would. I started to order the radio operator to drag Steve; then I stopped and did some more thinking.

I phoned my wife. "Mary," I said in a voice too low for any in the office to hear, "has Steve been there?"

"No." Her voice was uneasy. "Why, didn't he come home last night?"

"Listen, Mary," I went on abruptly, "when Steve comes in, tell him to stay home till I get there." I hung up before she could ask any more questions. I'd have to arrest Steve, and it'd be a little easier to do that at home than at the office before all the fellows.

I WAS pretty shaky about making the next phone call. I finally went through with it. I dialed the mayor's residence. A man answered. It wasn't the mayor. It sounded like Velz. I asked for Beatrice. I just felt compelled to learn if Steve had broken up with that girl. But I didn't know how to go about finding that out.

I recognized Beatrice's soft voice on the wire. I struggled for words, and finally asked: "Has Steve called

you this morning, Miss Beatrice? This is Chief York."

"No, he hasn't." Just that. Her voice told me nothing.

What next? I couldn't come right out and ask her. I did some rapid thinking and got nowhere. "I'm trying to locate Steve right away." I waited for her to say something. She didn't. "If he calls you, tell him to phone me," I added lamely.

She said she would. I let it go at that. I wasn't making any headway. Maybe Beatrice and Steve had had a spat—maybe not. I thought not, probably because I wanted to think that way.

I sat deaf and dumb and thinking. A phone call came for me. Mayor Winston!

"Chief York?" The mayor's voice had an edge to it. "I understand a girl, Maxine Stowe, was murdered at the Crescent House last night."

So Maxine Stowe was the girl's name. I hadn't found that out—I'd left details to Sergeant Argust. "Yes, sir," I said.

"I also understand there are some nasty angles to that case. I expect you to go the limit, if you like your job as chief of detectives. Understand?"

I heard myself saying I did, and he hung up.

I knew Mayor Winston didn't like Steve. The mayor preferred Councilman Velz as a prospective son-in-law. I was sure now Velz had answered the phone when I called the mayor's house. Velz was a fast, smooth worker.

I got to my feet, dazedly. "If Steve should come in tell him to go home and stay there," I flung over my shoulder as I went out.

At the Crescent House I found Argust and the others had finished and were just leaving when I came in.

"Art, get all the dope on Maxine Stowe," I directed, "and phone me out home if I'm not at the office. I feel all in." I couldn't go back to

the office and face the boys when this case began to break.

Argust lifted an inquisitive eyebrow. "You know who she is?"

"Yes. Didn't you?"

"Well—"

He hesitated. "Nothing in her handbag or personal effects to identify her. But I'd found out anyway." He gave a low whistle. "If she's Maxine Stowe, she's Councilman Velz's girl."

That registered. But my face told Argust exactly nothing.

"The bullet," put in the M. E., speaking to me, "ranged upward. The guy who shot her was sitting down or kneeling on the floor."

"Mebbe," I mumbled. I didn't want to hear much more about it. Steve was a crack shot with a pistol, and usually fired, at close range, from his hip.

I left them and went in to ask the shriveled-up proprietor another question.

"When did this guy you put in 223 come in here to get the room? What time?"

He lifted his stoop shoulders in a shrug, answered thoughtfully. "About midnight last night. I didn't see the dame come in."

MY HEART started pounding. I could have hugged that freak. "What d'ya mean?" I kept my voice even, but it was no easy job. "The girl wasn't with him when he registered?"

"Nope. He was by himself. Don't know when the girl came in. Never saw her. A guy, Cosselli, came in inquiring about the fellow in 223 after midnight—but he didn't go up to the room. Just walked right out."

Cosselli! Velz's underworld lieutenant! Cosselli had doubtless been checking up on Maxine Stowe for Velz, or—

I left the thought hanging. I made quick time crossing the street to a telephone booth in a drug store. If my kid brother hadn't been in-

volved in this mess, I could have reasoned it out with some sense.

I got Mayor Winston on the wire and came right out with the question on my mind. "Mayor, when you phoned me a while ago about that murder at the Crescent House, you said the girl was Maxine Stowe. Who told you that?"

"What do you mean, York?" His voice was caustic.

"I mean how did you know her name?"

"What's strange about that? Didn't you know? See here, York! Are you a detective, or what? Does the mayor of this city have to dig up all the evidence for the police department before a crime can be solved—"

"Listen, Winston!" I interrupted. Right then I knew my job as chief of detectives wasn't worth one dime. "It is a little strange when the mayor calls the detective chief and tells the name of the murdered girl before the investigating officers can find out who she is. Not a soul in the police department knew her name until you phoned me!" I wondered if I spoke the truth, but I intended to amply defend myself.

That held him. I knew it before he opened his mouth. "I see." His voice had changed. "Well, York, if it'll help you any, Councilman Velz phoned me about that girl." Those were the first kind words the mayor had given me in months.

Then I set out to learn if I had lied to the mayor. Argust could tell me that. But I spent a lot of valuable time sweating and trying to locate Argust.

Finally I caught him ducking out of my office just as I came up the stairs. "Art, we'd better go in my office and do a little talking."

His narrowed eyes sharpened. "Yea. We'd better take another look at that rooming house register."

So he had been looking for that register in my office! We went in and I locked the door.

"Art," I began, leveling a stare that made him shift uneasily, "We've been together a long time on the force. We've had our little differences, but at other times we've been pretty close together. Now, Art, I want you to give me the truth—about Velz."

His florid face took on a deeper red. "Okay, chief."

"Have you seen Velz, or talked with him, or sent him any information in the last ten hours?"

He answered without hesitation and almost spat his reply. "No!"

"Okay, Art." I was at the end of my rope in that connection. He'd made his answer. He'd stand by it. So far, I had never caught Art Argust in a lie.

"Let's take another look at the register, chief." In his low words ran an undercurrent of deep meaning, and I thought I saw sort of hidden fire in his jet eyes. "Where is it?"

"It's in my safe," I replied bluntly, "where it's going to stay, for the time being."

He moved his square head in a slight negative gesture. "You're making a mistake, chief."

I stalked to the door, unlocked it, and flung it wide. Then I stopped dead. Just as well have it out with Argust right now.

"Art, who do you think killed Maxine Stowe?" I demanded.

"Cosselli," he said firmly. There was a certain, meaningful something in his crisp tone.

THE TENSION in my body suddenly eased. He was going to stay loyal! Going to stick by Steve! "Cosselli," I repeated, woodenly, then nodded in slow agreement. "Front man for Velz, isn't he?"

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that," returned Argust. He turned abruptly, strode from the room, leaving me staring after him and wondering some more.

Argust knew as well as I did what

Cosselli was. But it rankled Argust for me to throw off on Velz. Argust still appreciated the play Velz had made to have him appointed chief instead of me. Argust kept me guessing.

I had enough now on Velz to throw a scare into him. I found him upstairs in his office at the city hall. His secretary tried to stop me, but I went right on into his private office. Without waiting for an invitation, which he wouldn't have given me anyway, I sat down across from Velz at his desk.

"Make yourself at home, York!" he invited sarcastically.

"Sure. Thanks. Got a little matter on my mind."

"I can't help you, York," he snapped. "I'm a member of the police committee, and all that, but I can't do anything for your brother. He'll have to take his rap, if that's what you have on your mind."

"Velz, the thing on my mind is the murder of Maxine Stowe. You're involved!"

He tensed perceptibly, then mechanically straightened a disordered stack of papers on his glass-topped desk. He leaned back and surveyed me from head to foot, his bland face expressionless. "Talk fast, York. I'm a busy man today."

"Not too busy to talk to me," I slapped back. "Velz, you're up to your neck in this Maxine Stowe murder!"

"Go on," he urged, ironically.

"You knew a girl had been murdered at the Crescent House and that her name was Maxine Stowe—before the police knew anything about it. How did you know, Velz?"

"Everybody in this town," he snorted contemptuously, "can learn all the answers before the police wake up. A fine bunch of officers—"

"You slipped up this time," I cut in. "You talked a little too fast to leave yourself in the clear."

His thin mouth tightened at the corners. "Make as many dumb plays

as you like, York. Something tells me you're not going to be chief of detectives long."

"Long enough to arrest you for murder! Better locate your bondsmen today, Velz. That's what I came here to tell you."

I don't know how much I impressed him. I was trying to force him to lay off Steve—at least until after the evening papers would go to press. I'd crack this case before morning if any human or set of humans could do it.

His round, sleek head on his short, thick neck wagged arrogantly. "You have evidence of course," he mocked. "So what are you waiting for?"

I was taking a long shot, and knew it too well. "I'll not be waiting long, Velz." I got up and somehow conquered a maddening impulse to take a punch at that round, smirky face. "I intend to charge you with the murder of Maxine Stowe!"

"If you haven't already arrested your brother for that murder," he flung at me, his voice now cold with fury, "you'd better do it before night, or there'll be a new chief of detectives tomorrow!"

"I'll nail you first!" I promised, and went out to see what I could do toward keeping that promise.

I phoned headquarters, then called Mary. Steve hadn't showed up. That puzzled me plenty.

PAGE ONE of the afternoon papers carried the story. They had all the sordid details, more than I knew myself, and rawhided me for not having Steve already under arrest. Somebody in the know had given those papers more than enough.

Then the boys at headquarters really went to town for me. I turned over that register and gave them all I knew. They tore every underworld hangout wide open. Argust seemed to work as hard as the others.

We knew room 221, the room adjoining Steve's at the Crescent House,

had been occupied last night by Nardi, a newcomer reported to be one of Cosselli's mobsters. But we couldn't locate Nardi, Cosselli or Steve.

The afternoon wore on and night came without anything important worked out. I began to wonder now just how a fellow like me who had been on the force almost two decades would word up a resignation when he turned in his badge. Then something broke.

A report came in that Velz had killed a burglar out in the suburbs. A burglar! I was there in no time, plenty weak with a cold seepage of sweat all over me.

I supposed Velz had framed Steve, and put him out of the way. Some strange intuition had prompted me to take a squad with me, including Argust. I don't know why I wanted Argust along, but I did.

I missed my guess about Steve. Relief almost wilted me when I saw the dead man sprawled on Velz's library rug. The body was face downward, but it wasn't Steve. My heart started beating again. I knelt and turned the bushy head slightly. Then I felt as if some one had slapped me in the face with a dash of ice water.

"Well," grunted Argust. "After looking all day, we've finally found Cosselli!"

"It is Cosselli, isn't it?" inquired Velz tonelessly, dabbing a monogrammed handkerchief at a blood-smeared hickey over his left ear. "I've seen the fellow before."

"Yes; you've seen the fellow before," I agreed, meaningly. "And it is Cosselli."

"He broke into my library," Velz went on unperturbed, pointing to a broken window catch on one of the library windows. "I heard the noise and came in here with my automatic. I turned on the light, and he swung on me with his blackjack. He struck me over the left ear and knocked me down."

He mopped the hickey again, gingerly. "But before he could hit me

again, I fired. He had a gun in one hand and his blackjack in the other."

Cosselli's right hand still clutched the blackjack, the gun was on the rug near the fingertips of his left.

"You moved the body?" I queried, hoping he would sense something officious in my tone. He did.

"Certainly not! Why should I?"

"You shouldn't," I admitted. "And I'm glad you didn't." He was sore now, and a bit off guard. "Just where were you when he hit you?"

He shifted his position a few feet to a point some three steps from the library door. "Standing right here."

"Right, there, eh? Standing or sitting?"

His face showed thorough disgust. "Standing—numbskull! I told you I had just come in, to see what the noise was."

"Let's see your automatic."

He handed it over.

HE reddened to the roots of his sleek, pomaded hair, and bit off the beginning of a curse. "You never miss an opportunity to make a monkey out of yourself—"

"Shut up!" I barked. "Now listen to me, Velz. Maybe it happened differently." I glanced at a clock on the mantel. "It's scarcely nine o'clock. Velz, and a little early for burglars."

I let him think that over before I continued. "Your idle talk has reminded me of some things I had forgotten, Velz. Thanks for the memories! Now maybe I can draw a little picture for you."

I understood now why the bullet, that had struck Maxine Stowe in the chest, had ranged upward as though fired by some one sitting or kneeling, or from the hip of some one standing. "Maybe you had Cosselli kill Maxine Stowe last night because you were afraid she'd make trouble if you didn't marry her. And you thought you had a good chance to marry the mayor's daughter if Maxine could be put out of the way, and my brother Steve eliminated.

"Maybe after the murder you got scared Cosselli might talk. So you called him here and shot him, hit yourself on the head, then put Cosselli's blackjack in his right hand and his gun in the left."

Argust nudged me, and whispered in my ear. "Look who's coming up the walk!"

I flicked a glance through the library window. The porch light illuminated a limping man. Steve!

"Watch Velz, fellows!" I yelled. "He's under arrest."

I made a dash for the corridor to grab Steve before he came in.

"Listen, chief!" gasped Argust. "Before you talk with Steve. Steve's signature on that rooming house register was genuine, but those words 'and wife' after his name were not in his handwriting. Somebody else wrote those words in, after Steve had registered. If you hadn't been so upset about your own brother being involved you'd have noticed the difference in the writing. I'd have told you sooner, if you hadn't acted so all-fired snooty with me."

Steve barged in the front door. "Steve. What's happened to you?"

His left arm was in a sling, his face banged up and he was limping badly. "I had a run-in with Nardi," he said hoarsely. "I got a confession out of him on this Maxine Stowe murder. Then he went crazy and grabbed his gun I had taken away from him, and he winged me. My first shot finished him off."

STEVE was pretty shaky on his feet, and I helped him down on a hallway bench. "Steve, why did you stay away from home last night—and register at the Crescent House?"

"I got a tip I'd learn something on Velz last night in room 221 if I could get in 223 adjoining. I fell for it. I rented 223, but couldn't hear anybody in 221. I went downstairs to check up on things and found that Nardi had rented 221.

"Prowling outside, I saw a man and a woman going up the fire escape into 221. Then I ran into Nardi. I started questioning him, and we had a fight. He smashed up my face a bit, and got away. Later I went back to my room and found that girl's body. Apparently she had been shot in 221 and then carried into my room. I slipped out and went looking for Nardi—"

"Steve," I interrupted, "why did you hide out? Why didn't you phone me?"

"No!" exclaimed Steve, stubbornly. "Somebody was trying to frame me, and I figured it was a personal matter between me and Velz. I finally found Nardi again, an hour ago, and got a confession about the whole setup. The man who went up the fire escape with Maxine Stowe was Cosselli. He took her up there and killed her.

"Velz had him do it. Maxine thought she was sneaking up there to see Velz. Velz had Cosselli put her out of the way so she wouldn't ball up his plans to marry Beatrice Winston. Velz wanted me fixed at the same time."

Steve shook his head regretfully. "Then Nardi went nuts, winged me and I had to plug him. I hated that. I wanted the testimony of both Nardi and Cosselli to pin the rap on Velz. Now we'll have to get along on Cosselli's testimony alone. But I'll make Cosselli spill it all! He'll

get off with life instead of the chair. I started looking for Cosselli, and heard he had come here to see Velz. He's here, isn't he? Cosselli—"

Argust spoke up. "Yes, Steve—Cosselli's here. But he won't testify for you—or anybody else. Cosselli's dead. Velz says Cosselli broke into his house, and he shot him—thought he was shooting a burglar."

Steve groaned. "My last witness to pin the rap on Velz gone!" He got up and limped into the library.

Argust and I followed. "You won't need Cosselli's testimony, Steve," I said. "I've got Velz—and he'll be convicted of murder!"

"You're crazy!" blurted Velz out of a twisted mouth. He was plenty white now. "I haven't murdered anybody. I killed a burglar! I was standing right here. He struck me on the head with a blackjack—then I fired. That's not murder!"

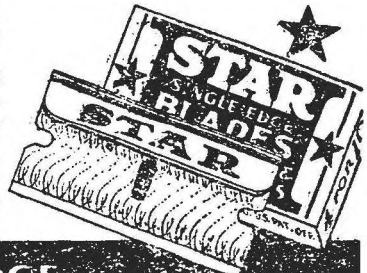
"You've lied, Velz!" I barked. "Cosselli came here to see you and you shot him down in cold blood. I told you your talk reminded me of some things I'd forgotten—about Cosselli. Again, thanks for the memories—the second murder memo.

"Two years ago I shot Cosselli in a running fight and broke his right arm. That bullet left his lower arm stiff. He could raise it, but no higher than his waist. It was impossible for Cosselli to raise his right hand high enough to strike you on the head with a blackjack!"



WARNING TO CRANKS

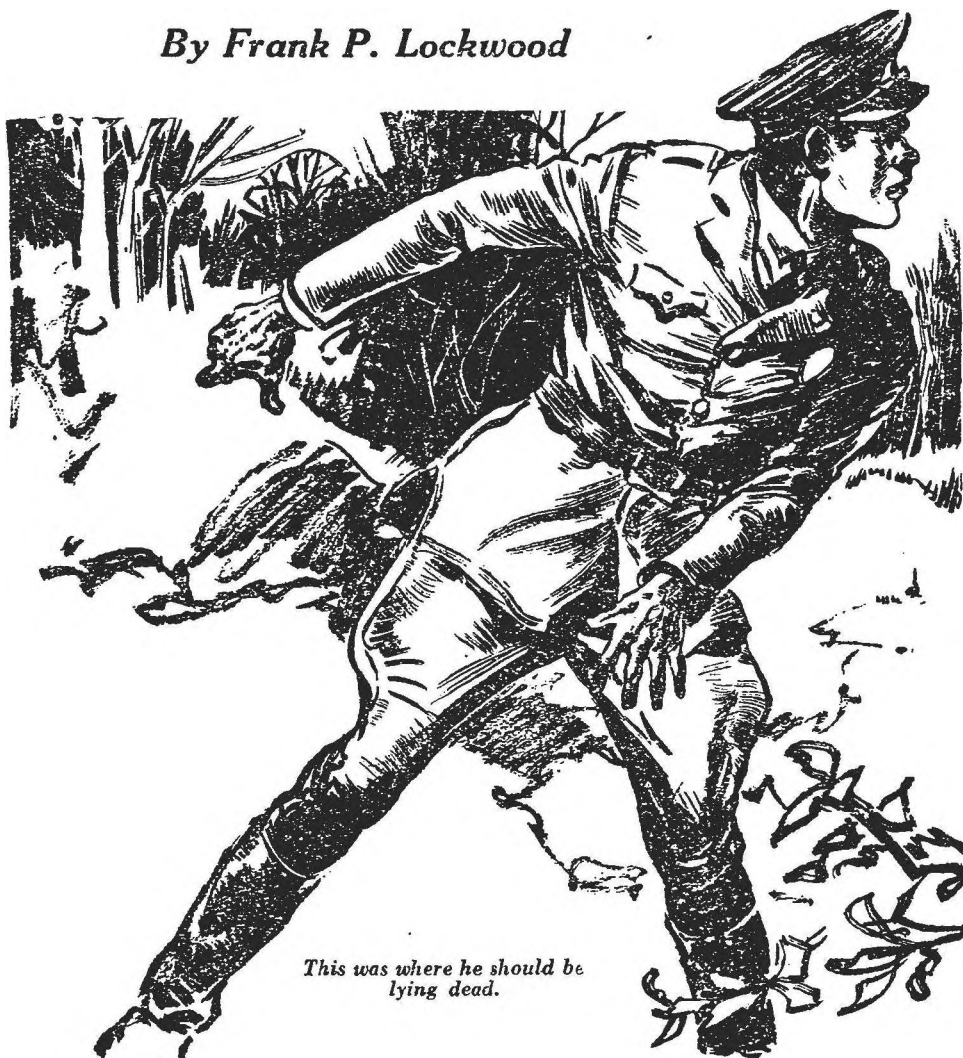
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STAR SINGLE-EDGE BLADES 4 FOR 10¢
FOR GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

Pinch-Hit for Death

By Frank P. Lockwood



To State Trooper Steve Barry this was not just another murder hunt. On this highway of doom his brother had met sudden, violent death. And all the time Steve Barry knew that he himself was supposed to have died—and that a quirk of fate had thrust his brother into his own coffin.

OLD AMOS FINNEY beamed from behind the counter of his small ice-cream store on the Limms Highway. This murder business boomed his trade. Since the state police took over the rear of his place for temporary headquarters, crowds had been milling about in the heat-haze of the August day.

A telephone rang.

The supple figure of Steve Barry stiffened as he rested lean fingers on

Captain Locke's desk, awaiting that officer's recognition. Three nights ago Steve's brother, Matt, had answered a ring like that in the sub-station at Limms. . . .

Matt Barry had turned from the phone to the recumbent figure of his brother, Steve, stretched out on the bed in his quarters.

"Call for you."

"Oh, lord!" Steve groaned. "And I'm dog-tired. What is it?"

"Wrecked car on the Limms Highway. Looks like some one's had an accident."

Steve yawned and made to get up. Matt said:

"I'll take it for you, kid. It's probably routine."

"But you can't—"

"Sure I can. Used to be in the service, didn't I? If it's anything important, I'll call you."

Steve sighed. "If you only would!"

"Why not? You're nearly out. Relax!" And Matt left on the mission.

He never returned. Now Steve stood but two hours after Matt's funeral, insistent upon helping in the search for his brother's murderer. . . .

Captain Locke leaned over the desk on thick arms. "You're quite sure they mistook your late brother for you?"

"Absolutely!" Steve averred. "No one knew Matt was here. We looked a lot alike."

Locke nodded and drummed the desk. "Too bad you didn't go out. Your prize ring experience might have saved a murder."

Steve accepted the rebuke quietly.

"You say you suspect no one in particular?"

"That's right, sir."

"Then what could you do in South Flats?"

"Nose around."

Locke snorted. "And nose into trouble! No, it don't sound healthy."

That thin line, cutting the hollows in Steve's brown cheeks, deepened.

"But, sir—"

"I'm sorry. We can't afford trouble

on the Flats. Old Granite Puss would love to go for us on false arrest."

Sergeant Monk Jordan wheezed from the end of Locke's desk: "Who's Granite Puss?"

LOCKE nodded toward Steve Barry. "Ask your buddy. He was brought up around South Flats. . . . That is all, Barry."

Steve Barry went out of the store followed by the stocky Sergeant Jordan. They stopped at a shaded spot removed from the captain's hearing. Barry's thin face was tense.

"Routine, routine!" he complained bitterly. "Sit around and wait for leads—like that old woman who heard some one groan."

Jordan said nothing.

"Or," Barry raved on, "that patch of gray pants on the barbed wire fence. Probably some chicken thief's."

Suddenly Jordan prompted: "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Who's Granite Puss?"

Barry shrugged. "A penny pincher named Uriah Skelly."

Jordan's little black eyes widened. "You mean that queer gink from Soway who nearly beat a small boy to death a few years back?"

"That's him. The kid swiped a dime on Skelly."

"Some one in the crowd kicked his spine before you could get him away?"

Barry nodded glumly. "Correct."

"I remember," Jordan whistled. "They gave him a year or two. When he got out, everyone in Soway froze him stiff. So he moved onto South Flats with the half-bakes. . . . Sa-ay! You don't think Skelly—that is, that Matt—"

"Why not?" Barry demanded.

Jordan scratched his head. A V of black hair left but an inch between its apex and his bushy brows. "He was suspected of a couple of murders after he got out. But they couldn't get anything on him."

Barry countered with: "But wasn't it funny—the two guys who were bat-

tered to death like Matt—happened to be the D.A. who convicted Skelly, and the bird supposed to have kicked him in the spine?"

Here Jordan threw a wrench. "But this Skelly is crippled—goes on crutches. He couldn't have battered your—that is—"

"Granite Puss has brains, Monk, and money—money he's made protecting the scurvy mongrels he lives among. Police haven't pinned anything on the South Flats area since Skelly moved in there."

"You think he hired some one to—"

"He could, couldn't he?" Barry came back. "Those half-bakes down there think he's king of the master minds. They'd do anything for him. He gets them out of all kinds of jams."

A trooper strode out of the store. "Hey, Barry! The captain wants you."

Barry re-entered the store. Locke was drumming again.

"Barry, I've been thinking over your request. You might go to the Flats."

That deep line broke into arcs when Steve smiled. "Thanks, captain."

"But mind you—no arrests! Report your findings to me first."

"Yes, sir."

"Take Jordan with you. And start now."

TEN MINUTES later, Steve Barry and Monk Jordan were purring up the Limms Highway through the deadly heat that had burned grass lifeless and drooped the dust-coated foliage of trees. A quarter mile out, Barry braked the troop-car and they got out. Barry pointed to shrubbery near the road.

"There it is!" His face twitched. "Monk, his arms were twisted out of their sockets!"

Monk Jordan nodded soberly. "I know. Awful!"

"What *kind* of a devil—?"

"Devil is right. And that wrecked car business—?"

"Was a gag," Steve Barry finished,

glancing around. "The killer could have ducked across that field and down the gully by the tracks. Once over them, he'd have a back road to South Flats. Not a chance in a thousand anyone would see him at that time of night." Steve frowned. "Funny thing, Monk."

"What?"

"Skelly's been out of prison three years. These three murders have been six months apart—and all alike! Another thing."

Monk Jordan waited invitingly.

"There's only one bird on South Flats big enough to maim a man like that."

The sergeant frowned. "You mean Orlie Sykes?"

Barry nodded. Jordan started to protest, noted Barry's set face and desisted.

They got into the car and sped on. Late afternoon had them slowly driving along the main street of South Flats, dubbed Poverty Boulevard by the neighboring town of Soway. Straight to the house of Uriah Skelly on the far end of the street. Skelly's place stood out in its smear of white paint like an electric sign over a dark alley. On some boards of an unpainted addition built from packing-box lumber, a firm name was stencilled in black.

Granite Puss sat on his porch in a chair, crutches by his side. A barrel-chested, long-armed man, shorn of his brute strength by an indignant citizen's kick. He was alone save for a bristling gray dog, allied to the wolf breed. Low and ominous growls came from him as the troopers approached.

Steve Barry yanked his gun from the leg holster. Jordan restrained him.

"Easy! We're on Skelly's property—and without a warrant."

A small, rat-featured man appeared in the doorway. It was Mort Sprague who looked after Skelly for his board and keep.

Granite Puss chewed tobacco slowly. He ejected a stream of its juice toward the troopers. It would have

struck Barry had he not jumped aside.

"What's the idea, Skelly?" Barry demanded darkly.

Granite Puss motioned. "Where that struck is the deadline for skunks, rattlesnakes and vermin!"

Barry trembled with rage. Again Jordan restrained him.

"Don't come any closer, troopers!" Skelly warned. "I've brought Wolf up to hate striped pants. State your business from there."

Barry fished into a pocket and produced a piece of gray cloth. "Ever see that, Skelly?"

Skelly chewed calmly. "What is it?"

"Part of a man's pants." Barry would have sworn fear jerked into Mort Sprague's eyes; but Skelly's face remained granite.

"Can't say that I have."

"It was found on a barb-wire fence off the Limms Highway."

"Got a warrant for anybody?"

"Not yet."

"Better get going—until you can bring one!"

BARRY'S jaw tightened. "We're looking around first, Skelly." He touched Jordan's arm. As the two turned away, Barry's observing eyes took in the layout of the place.

They drove back the length of Poverty Boulevard. Derelicts—unkempt, misshapen and weird-eyed—stared at them from the squalor and stench of filth-strewn dooryards. At the home of Orlie Sykes, the troopers stopped and asked questions. The giant Orlie was one soul on the Flats who had never shown open dislike of a police uniform.

But he could give them no information; yet Steve Barry was positive that same flash of fear that had whipped into Sprague's expression, gleamed in Sykes' eyes.

Back at headquarters, the pair reported to Locke. The troop captain drummed his desk crisply.

"Afraid you wouldn't find anything. Glad you didn't let Granite Puss egg you into trouble."

Barry went back to the sub-station, very disheartened. This placid inactivity burned him.

In the bathroom, Jordan started water running. "Calm yourself, fella. Rome wasn't built in a day."

Barry paced restlessly. "I can't eat—I can't sleep."

"The mills of the gods grind slowly."

"I had to lie in bed coddling my lazy carcass—and let my brother go out to get killed!"

Jordan soaped his hands. "Don't lash yourself that way."

"I might as well have murdered Matt!"

"You'll go nuts if you don't get off that line."

"Suppose it had been *your* brother?"

Jordan walked into the bedroom with a towel. "I know how you feel but—"

"No, you don't!" Barry flared: "Nor anyone else. If they did, they couldn't just sit and wait for something to happen."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know," Barry cried, "but I can't stand this. I've got to have action!"

"Better climb into bed, fella. Something will happen. Murder will out."

"I'll make it 'out'!" Barry walked to a window and stared down upon the street below. Distant thunder rumbled. "You go to bed. Don't mind me."

Jordan shrugged, disrobed and tumbled in with a sigh of relief. A minute later he was sound asleep.

Barry continued pacing the room. Finally he sat down. Catching up a magazine, he idly turned its pages. From one of them a firm name leaped out at him. Barry's eyes jerked to the ad and picture above that name—and as they did, his spine stiffened and his hair fairly rose.

Jordan jerked straight up in bed as the magazine leaving Barry's hand hit the wall back of the sergeant. Simultaneously, sharp lightning zigged, fol-

lowed by a dread crackle of nearness. "Jordan, I'm going to South Flats again!"

"Wait a minute, fella!" The sergeant clambered out. "Hold everything!"

"I'm jumping the service!"

"Nix! You can't do that."

Barry shot back, "I'm doing it!" and started stripping off his service trousers.

"It's a misdemeanor!"

"So what?"

"The super will send you up for a year."

"Hand me my blue pants from the closet."

Jordan tried reasoning. "For cripes sake, listen! That whole Flats mob is crazy. They could kill you! And Skelly would cover it up in some way. Don't you see?"

Barry went to the closet himself and got the blue pants. Jordan backed up against the door.

"You're not going!"

Barry pulled on the pants and buckled the belt. "You tell Locke in the morning that I've quit!"

"You're not going!"

Steve Barry looked at Jordan and sucked in his breath quickly. You couldn't argue with the sergeant. He ate service with his meals, he dreamed service in his sleep. It was his god.

So Barry clipped him with a right that had the iron and accuracy of a trained and fit body. The sergeant plopped on his face.

MIDNIGHT! Gloom, wind and the pounding of the summer storm on the muddy stretches of South Flats. Lightning flashed, and the one-story hovels came out in weird, split-second relief.

Granite Puss Skelly lay on his back in bed and listened. On a cot in another corner, Mort Sprague snored through the fury of the night. Suddenly:

"Mort!"

Sprague roused slowly. "Eh—what?"

"Something's wrong!"

"Yeah?" The little man, garbed in pants and sweatshirt, got to his feet.

"Listen!" Skelly commanded.

Lightning zigzagged and thunder pounded relentless echoes along the gloom of the sky. Skelly whistled shrilly at his dog. There was no answering whine, not even in the lull of the storm. Skelly cried:

"Turn on the light!"

Mort Sprague fumbled his way along the wall to the switch. He pressed the button.

A tense, slim figure stood with back against the wall and .38 levelled. "Stand where you are, Sprague—and put your hands behind you!"

"I knew it!" Skelly cried. "Barry, I'll have you out of the service for this!"

"I'm already out, Skelly. Move over here, Sprague." Barry clicked handcuffs on the trembling man.

Granite Puss snarled suddenly: "Wolf! My dog! You—"

Steve Barry enlightened the man. "I threw a noose of steel cable around the dog house. It had a rag with chloroform on it. The dog passed out for a while."

"Why, you—"

"Save it! Skelly, I want money."

"You've come to a fine place for it."

"I know that," Steve said quietly. "I'm out to find who killed my brother. It'll take coin. You've got it—I need it." And when Skelly's granite expression did not change nor speech come from him: "All right, I'll search the dump till I find it."

No fear showed in the snaky film of Skelly's eyes. Bolstered on two pillows he sat in bed and stared hard at the trooper. Barry returned the stare, hazarding:

"The most likely place you'd hide money here would be in the cellar wall. In case of fire, you could dig it out of the ruins."

The bright eyes flickered now. Barry knew he had struck home. But Skelly persisted:

"I tell you, Barry, there is no money here."

Barry moved a pace nearer Skelly's bed. "Listen! I had reports on you when you were up. You studied law in the prison library every chance you got. Why? So you could come out and teach these South Flatters how to steal and get away with it. You raked off your percentage protecting them with alibis. I figure that kind of money is as much mine as yours."

Quiet between them. The storm howled outside. Rain hammered hard on the roof. Lightning flashed and crackled with breathtaking sharpness.

Then it happened!

THE MAN who all Soway County had supposed was crippled, rose from his bed with the agile ease of a trained athlete. He stood naked save for the black pants that draped his squat, bowed legs. Barrel-chested, ape-armed and cruelly intelligent of face, he looked plenty formidable to the slim trooper who faced him from the kitchen doorway.

"When you go into the cellar, I'll go with you!" Skelly promised. "One of us won't come back!"

"I'm not going into the cellar," Barry assured him. "That was a gag to force you onto your feet."

Skelly jeered: "S m a r t ! Now what?"

"That part's up to you."

"Right! . . . Barry, you're trapped! I know my way around this house in the dark. You don't. Right from where I stand I can shut off the lights!"

Mort Sprague whimpered. Barry's eyes never left those fixed, snaky ones of Skelly.

"I'm glad you came to me, Barry. For three years I've been exercising and disciplining my spine, strengthening my whole body—and the doctors said I'd probably never walk again! The world has their word for it. What an alibi! No one would ever believe

what care and training have done for me."

Barry's manner invited Skelly to continue. The house shuddered under a terrific crash of thunder.

"Barry, you forced entrance here. You chloroformed my dog. With your gun, I'm going to kill Sprague—"

The hapless wretch in handcuffs screamed his terror. "Oh, jeez, no! You can't! You—"

"And then, Barry, with a heavy piece of firewood I'm going to crush your windpipe! It will be the kind of blow Mort would strike running onto you in the dark. Can't you imagine, Barry, your windpipe fills with blood, you can't breathe, you choke!

"And then tomorrow, when the bodies are found, I tell them you shot Sprague just as he clipped you with the stick!"

For five seconds, no one moved or spoke. Thunder shook the house to its foundation.

"I made a mistake when I got your brother. This time there'll be no slips—no torn pants. Then, after you've been taken care of, I'll clear out of these parts, change my name and live on what I've made out of the Flats." And the face that had earned Skelly the sobriquet of Granite Puss now lit with a savage anticipation.

Sprague screamed: "Shoot him! Why don't you shoot him?"

Barry couldn't shoot him. He had no warrant, no right to be here—except a hunch. He said: "Maybe you can shut off the lights from where you are, Skelly; but you can't get into the kitchen without coming through this door. And that's where you'll have to come to get my gun!" He had to break Skelly through Skelly's weakest point—his vanity over his physical rehabilitation.

Barry bent low and sent the .38 spinning through the kitchen darkness. Then he straightened. "Now, lights or no lights, come on! You won't get a chance to jump on my back, the way you did Matt's!"

SAX

AS SKELLY poised, figuring how quickest to settle this man between him and the gun, Barry knew that every muscle in his opponent's body was hard as the unyielding face that topped it. When they came to grips, he could expect no quarter from the iron-muscle law-breaker.

Lightning crackled and thunder pounded against a quivering earth. Skelly charged.

Barry could have sidestepped that lunge. But he meant to stand or fall by his aim to keep Skelly out of the kitchen and away from that .38. So he pounded a right square into the ex-cripple's face, backed by everything he had. The blow did not check Skelly in the least. He came on, the sheer weight of him crowding Steve through the doorway and into the blackness of the kitchen.

Sprague screamed. A hissing crackle and boom as lightning struck on the Flats.

Barry, unbalanced, bumped a chair and it overturned. He went down. Without a sound, Skelly shuffled after him. Sprague yelled:

"Don't let him get hold of your arms! He'll tear them off you!"

As Barry rolled over and came up, one foot contacted the .38. He kicked it under the stove. Back-peddalling to gain stance, the trooper rammed the kitchen table. He shot around, placing it between Skelly and himself. And Skelly, even in the darkness, sensed the move. He jammed the table against Steve's thighs, pinning him to the kitchen wall.

Plates in the cupboard over Barry's head rattled. Facing the glow from the bedroom, Barry saw the table was littered with supper dishes. He caught one up and broke it in Skelly's face. No sound from Granite Puss. The trooper smashed him with another. Skelly swung a frying pan, opening a gash over Steve's eye. Blood streamed from it.

With a tremendous surge, Barry shoved the table back and dropped.

Under Skelly's weight, that table hurtled in to the wall with a crash. A rifle on brackets dropped to the floor and exploded. Barry scrambled from under the table and to his feet. The back of his hand smeared blood from his eye.

As Skelly charged him in the darkness with the unerring aim of a cat, the trooper drove a left and right into his body. Skelly grunted but came on.

Barry circled, keeping the light to Skelly's back, playing for a vulnerable spot. He hoped desperately to drop Granite Puss for the count. But, maneuvering in this unfamiliar darkness. Barry constantly bumped furniture. He couldn't get set because Skelly crowded him relentlessly.

Then one of those long, sweeping arms caught Barry, lifted him onto the stove and nearly off the other side. The trooper rolled as Skelly sought to pin him there. Granite Puss caught one of his arms.

Then blackness! Lightning had blown out a fuse.

A LURID FLASH lit up the kitchen for a split-second. A terrible scream ripped from Sprague, outlined in the doorway, as he saw Barry's arm twisting up his back. Barry lashed a heel into Skelly's groin and broke the hold. But as he turned to paw with that left hand, he knew Skelly had rendered it useless.

Now, with a lone hand, he must keep Granite Puss off—in a blackness with which Skelly was at home through long years of daily habit. A one-armed fight for his life against a man who was inhumanly powerful.

Again Granite Puss caught him with one of those sweeping blows, and again Barry was catapulted onto the stove and off to the floor. He fell on the rifle. Coming up he gripped the barrel with his one good hand near the trigger guard. Fighting physical exhaustion, he ploughed that gun butt straight against the bridge of Skelly's nose!

A horrible scream, the first real

sound to come from Granite Puss. Barry dropped the heavy rifle from sheer weakness. But he must keep going, keep fighting!

As Skelly backed away in that darkness, silent after that one cry, Barry knew he would be coddling the mess of broken bone and mangled flesh. So he followed up those shuffling steps. Against the outer kitchen door, he bumped Skelly.

With that left hand from which Granite Puss had twisted all punching power, Barry pawed to locate the left side of Skelly's body—the vulnerable heart. Blood blinded one eye. He did not bother to wipe it away.

Then Barry found his mark! He ripped his good right hand into the spot backed by one hundred and eighty pounds of steel-spring desperation. The slump and sag of Skelly's body told he had struck home! Just one more punch! And, he felt so weak, so futile!

Lightning flashed again. It lit up the gory splash that was Skelly's face. In it the eyes rolled from temporary paralysis. Barry's right came back. Darkness again, but his eye had located the spot unflinching. The fist caught Skelly right on the button and completed his demoralization. But even as Granite Puss collapsed, Barry felt himself going. He called weakly to Sprague:

"Get a rope! Tie him! Get a—"

But suddenly he remembered Sprague was handcuffed. There was a loud pounding somewhere, then everything went black. . . .

Sergeant Monk Jordan bent over the bed in the sub-station where Steve Barry lay swathed in bandages. "You see, quick as I came to, I got Locke and the boys to follow you out there."

"But my resignation!"

"Resignation, my eye! What do you take me for?"

"But I told you I was quitting—and I socked you."

Jordan rubbed his jaw, grinning. "You just practised on me for the Skelly job. What put you wise to Granite Puss?"

Steve Barry looked away. A long strip of plaster nearly covered his left eye. "I saw a firm name on that packing-box addition to Skelly's house—the part they hadn't got 'round to paint yet. I saw that same name under a magazine ad. It was for an exerciser to adjust and strengthen spines."

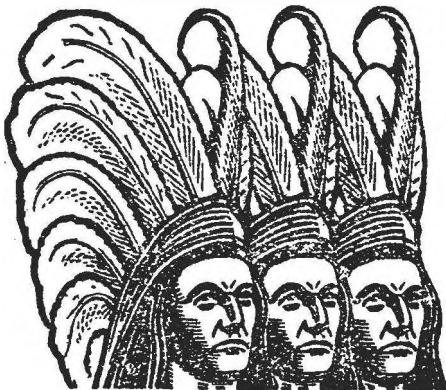
"Oh-h!"

"Did they get Skelly, Monk?"

"They sure did."

"Was Locke—sore?"

Monk Jordan grinned again. "Not too sore. And I guess he's recommending one Stephen Barry for a sergeantcy."



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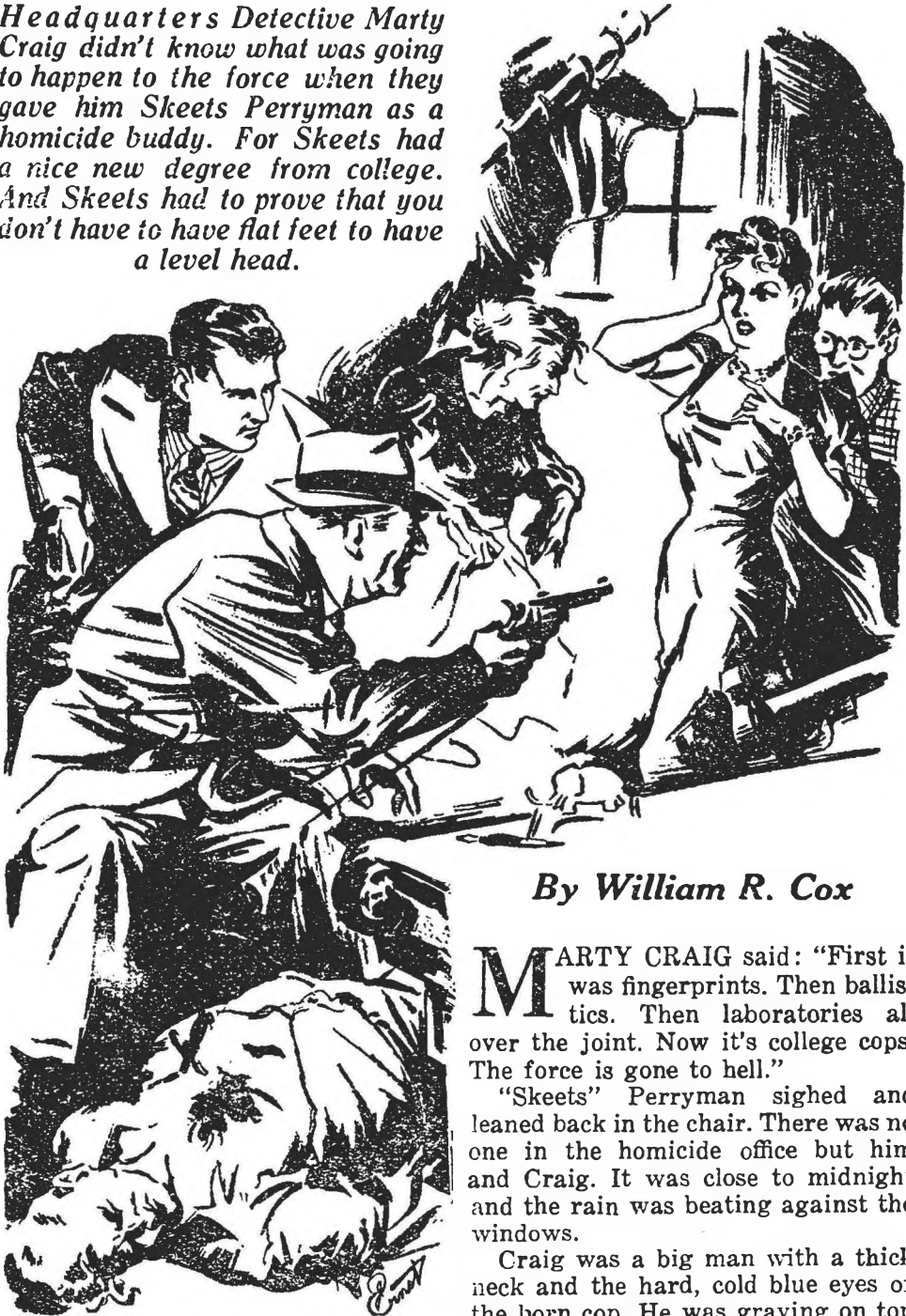
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CIGARS

Mr. Sleuth, B.A.

Headquarters Detective Marty Craig didn't know what was going to happen to the force when they gave him Skeets Perryman as a homicide buddy. For Skeets had a nice new degree from college. And Skeets had to prove that you don't have to have flat feet to have a level head.



By William R. Cox

MARTY CRAIG said: "First it was fingerprints. Then ballistics. Then laboratories all over the joint. Now it's college cops. The force is gone to hell."

"Skeets" Perryman sighed and leaned back in the chair. There was no one in the homicide office but him and Craig. It was close to midnight and the rain was beating against the windows.

Craig was a big man with a thick neck and the hard, cold blue eyes of the born cop. He was graying on top

and his feet were flat, but he had the strength and durability, Skeets knew, of a bull.

Skeets, young, slim, debonair in his blue serge suit and neatly shined shoes, looked like a prosperous business man. His carefully kept hands were muscular and his carriage was straight and almost military, but he could not and did not look like a cop.

Craig growled on: "I been on this job twenty years. I dunno what I ever did to get a college guy for a pardner. I dunno. . . ."

Skeets said: "Why don't you lay off, Marty? I don't bite. And I don't play marbles. So you were on the force twenty years. And you're still a first-grade detective."

Craig banged a big fist on the table and said: "Don't talk back to me, Perryman. And don't gimme that stuff. I might be still a ranker but my hands are clean. Get that straight."

"I know, I know," said Skeets placatingly. "You're an honest cop, Marty. You don't wear the collar of any dirty politician. I know all that. But listen to me for a minute.

"I went on the force because I was broke. I had a B. A. from Princeton and a family name and no job and no money. I deliberately chose the police because as a kid I always wanted to be a cop. Did you want to grow up to be a cop, Marty?"

"I wanted to be a motorman," admitted Marty, off guard for the moment. He added hastily: "That ain't got nothin' to do with it. College guys ain't got no right bein' cops. They ain't got the nut for it. It takes a bulldog to do this job. College guys got too much imagination or somethin'."

SKEETS said temperately: "I did my time in blues, Marty. They made me a plainclothes man, and I did a year in that. When I asked for homicide detail, they gave it to me and assigned me to be your partner. It's a job, it's what the boss says and it's what we've got to do. I'm makin' the

best of it. We haven't been on a case yet. Why don't you save your beef?"

"You're makin' the best of it? You? Why you lucky stiff, I'm the best damn detective on the Newkirk force," belittled Craig.

"You have the most stool pigeons," pointed out Skeets mockingly. "You've been around the longest. But what case did you ever break with your brains? You're a bull head, Craig, and I'll prove it to you some day."

Craig's big hands closed into mailed fists. He said: "Why, you—I'll—"

"Don't try it," warned Skeets, angry clear through. "I'm sick of taking it from you old-time mush-heads. You can't lick one side of me, Craig. You're too old. Don't start something you can't finish."

The phone rang abruptly. Craig grabbed for it, snarled his name. He listened, and the red slowly faded from his countenance. He said crisply:

"Yessir. Okay. Right out there."

He grabbed at his oilskin slicker and snapped: "Murder. Out at Snipe Hill. Make it snappy, Perryman."

Skeets grabbed his raincoat and ran after the big man. He knew Snipe Hill. His father had owned it at one time. He wondered who had been murdered in that exclusive section of Newkirk. He would, he thought grimly, have the bulge on Craig in this initial case. He would be operating among his own kind.

They rolled rapidly in the department coupé, turning off at the edge of town onto a dark road lined with trees. They went up a hill to a wide avenue. There were only two houses on the street, large, well-built, surrounded by spacious grounds. Skeets murmured:

"Corter McDowell, I have no doubt, in spite of your bull-headed silence, Mr. Craig."

The big detective grunted: "How'd you guess, smart guy?"

"Corter McDowell is a big, hard man with plenty of money and the gift of making enemies. He built these two houses, sold one to the interior decorator, F. Benton Hodge, then decided

he didn't want any more neighbors. He owns the street. He's a good murderee."

"What's them?" asked Craig suspiciously.

"A murderee is a guy who figures to get it in the neck from a murderer," explained Skeets blithely. "It's an idea of mine. People are either one or the other."

"What am I?"

"You, my friend," said Skeets, "are a murderee in your own right. You go around being bull-headed and asking for trouble. Let's take a look at this, huh?"

Craig braked the car, and they went up the walk to the house. A tiny woman with a sharp face and wispy gray hair opened the door. She said volubly:

"You're the police. I can see that. I'm Mrs. Garthwaite, the housekeeper. I came home at twenty minutes to twelve exactly. He was lying there, just as you'll find him. I didn't hear any noises or see anyone. I was on my day off and spent it with my niece. I can prove it."

Craig stared at her. Skeets said soothingly: "Mrs. Garthwaite, I see that you are a keen student of detective mysteries. You seem to have your story very straight. Thank you very much."

She nodded briskly and led them inside, much as if she had stage-directed the scene and was proud of her handiwork. Craig tapped his forehead inquiringly. Skeets shook his head and whispered:

"Movies and the magazines. Lots of people are like that today."

THE ROOM was large and had been a study and den for the bachelor McDowell. The walls were hung with weapons, particularly daggers and swords from far corners of the world. There were many books. Skeets looked at them with quick interest and saw that they were all travel books interspersed with blood and thunder. He nodded. That would be Corter McDowell.

The furniture was a wreck. Chairs were overturned, the heavy desk was askew, curtains were ripped from their fastenings. In the middle of the floor Corter McDowell lay on his back.

He had been a two-hundred-pound, florid man in his mid-forties. His blond hair was thick, and he had been in good physical condition. He lay with arms outstretched, his shirt half torn off, his muscular chest exposed. Under the left nipple protruded the haft of a stiletto.

Marty Craig said: "He gave the guy a helluva battle at that."

There were bruises on McDowell's skin. One ear was puffed and his mouth was smashed to a pulp. It seemed to Skeets that his nose was broken and his eyes had been almost battered closed.

He said: "Some man who could hit was around and about."

"Find a guy who's good enough to beat up a hard-boiled egg like McDowell and we got a suspect," agreed Craig.

Mrs. Garthwaite said: "There's no man I know. But there's those who hated Corter McDowell, gentlemen."

Skeets said gently: "Yes? And who might they be, Mrs. Garthwaite?"

The old woman looked mysterious. Before she could open her mouth to speak, there was a noise at the front door. Marty Craig whirled, dragging out his service revolver. The door opened and a tall, beautiful girl walked in, her face pale but determined.

Two men followed her closely. Marty barked: "Easy, there. Keep your hands in sight."

The first man said: "Oh come, now. Put that weapon away. My goodness, you might shoot some one."

He was short and thin and his hands fluttered. He wore thick glasses, and his hair was long and heavily pomaded. His mouth was terrified and he was palely determined not to look at the corpse on the floor. He wore a mauve sports shirt with carelessly knotted

tie to match and a loose topcoat against the rain.

The second man was compact and square-shouldered. He was attired in jodphurs and riding boots, and his white shirt was flecked with blood. The knuckles of his hands were cracked and bleeding, and he sported a black eye. Skeets said:

"Hiya, Mott? You been fightin' with some one?"

Marty Craig said: "Yeah. You been fightin' with Corter McDowell, whoever you are?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders and said: "Hi, Skeets. Heard you were a cop. Yeah, I guess I'm in a spot."

Skeets explained: "This is Mott Tisdale, Marty. And the little gentleman is F. Benton Hodge, noted interior decorator and neighbor of McDowell. The lady is, if I recognize her from newspaper pictures, Miss Moira Farquahar, who was until last week engaged to McDowell."

Marty Craig said: "Well, well. Now ain't that nice? Looks like Mr. Tisdale's got a story to tell, too. Ain'cha, Mr. Tisdale?"

Mott Tisdale said in a dull voice: "I have. And it's a lousy one, too."

The jittery F. Benton Hodge piped: "Whatever you say will be held against you, Mott. I wouldn't talk too much. This is a serious matter. I'd be careful how I talked to these men. I'd get a lawyer before I went too far."

Marty Craig yelled: "Shut that little squirt up, Perryman. We can crack this case right here before the mob gets it. They're on a homicide in town. We got half an hour. This would make us, kid."

Skeets said horrifiedly: "You wouldn't have me strike him, would you, Marty?"

F. BENTON HODGE stared from one to the other. He made a futile gesture, his mouth half open, then subsided. The girl backed to the wall at the menacing note in Marty's voice

and stood there, her head held high. She was beautiful, Skeets realized. She had all the features, all the earmarks. She was what he had been brought up to admire, to some day aspire to possess. He shook his head and came down to earth.

Mott Tisdale was saying: "I had to come back and tell you. You'd have found out anyway. Corter and I quarrelled. We were drinking heavily and—we got into something personal. He took a crack at me and I went to work on him."

"With the furniture and whatever else you could get your hands on," nodded Craig. "When you couldn't down him, you grabbed a shiv off the wall and stuck it into him."

Tisdale shivered. He said: "I licked him all right. I licked hell out of him."

"You ain't half big enough," said Craig. "Go on. Let's have it all."

Tisdale said stoically: "Hodge heard the fracas clear over at his house. He called Miss Farquahar, stupidly enough. She came in—but I don't remember that. I was seein' red. And the liquor. We drank almost a quart. I—I can't remember the end."

Craig sneered: "Same old guff. Red haze, eh? Goes good in court. All right, Miss Farquahar. Let's hear your story."

The girl's voice was clear and bell-like. She spoke as well as she looked, Skeets thought. Her brown eyes were level and wide. He had always preferred brunettes. She said:

"What has been said is true so far as I know. Mr. Hodge called me because he knew I could stop the row. None of us, naturally, wanted any scandal. I came as quickly as I could."

She seemed to be addressing her remarks to Skeets. Craig said: "So what?"

She said in even accents: "I know that Corter had made remarks about Mott and me after I broke our engagement. They were not—nice remarks. I begged Mott to ignore them, but he came out here tonight and faced Cor-

ter. They sat down to talk it out, and the fight started. I believe that to be true.

"I came in just in time to see Mott knock Corter down. Mott was bleeding badly, so I dragged him into the kitchen with the idea of bathing his cuts and keeping him away from Corter in case Corter regained consciousness. We were in the kitchen for several minutes I suppose. I calmed Mott down and started back to see if I could do anything for Corter. He—was dead. With that knife in him."

"Of course the knife wasn't in him when you first came in," said Marty Craig sarcastically. "You'll swear to that. The wicked fairies put it there."

She looked the big detective squarely in the eye. She said: "You'll be astonished to know, Mr. Detective, that I couldn't swear to that. I was excited. I saw Mott lunge, Corter go down. I dragged Mott forcibly from the room. I didn't have time to look at Corter's body."

Skeets felt his pulse quicken. She was a thoroughbred, too. Mott Tisdale was motionless, staring with tragic eyes at the corpse on the floor. Hodge looked everywhere but at the body of his former neighbor. Mrs. Garthwaite's bright shrewd eyes darted from one to the other. The little old lady seemed almost pleasantly excited by the situation.

Craig said: "Well, now, that's honest of you, Miss Farquahar. It's a pushover so far. What you got to say, Mr. Hodge?"

The interior decorator said nervously: "I feel that I should not speak without consulting my attorney. You cannot force me to make a statement here and now."

Skeets cut in smoothly: "Of course, Marty, you could book Mr. Hodge as a material witness. The cells downtown aren't so bad. Except for the cockroaches."

F. Benton Hodge turned deathly pale. He said faintly: "Vermin? Oh, my. Well."

"Spill it," said Craig impatiently. "The mob'll be here any minute."

"I heard the din of the fight. It was terrific. After all, Corter was my friend. And Mott and Miss Farquahar. We are all friendly, you know."

"Yeah, yeah," said Craig. "Sing, will you?"

HODGE looked puzzled, then went on: "I called Moira because she alone could prevail upon them. When I knew she was here, I started over, but met her and Mott coming to my house. They told me—about Corter. I called the police. That is all I know."

Craig said incredulously: "You mean this battle went on for half an hour and you didn't come over to take a gander?"

Hodge's hand trembled at the loose knot of the mauve cravat. He said haughtily: "I abhor fisticuffs."

Craig stared at the carefully manicured fingertips of the almost claw-like hands. He said: "Oh, I get it. I suppose you can prove all that?"

"Why should I?" said Hodge with surprising shrewdness.

"Yeah," said Craig. "Why shouldn't you? Ain't nobody gonna accuse you of murderin' a guy McDowell's size."

He turned to the avid little housekeeper and said: "You got anything to add to this?"

Mrs. Garthwaite said energetically: "Plenty. There was a mess in the kitchen. Blood and cloths. Still there. Ought to be fingerprints. If you know enough. I haven't seen you look for 'em. You haven't even looked on the knife. Or in the room. I don't think you're going about this in the right way at all, young man. I don't think—"

Craig said: "Okay, okay. Let's skip all that. Fingerprints are okay. The boys from the lab'll love 'em. I want this settled right now. You wanta make a confession, Tisdale?"

Mott Tisdale looked miserably at Skeets. He said: "I can't confess. I don't know whether I did it or not. You know my temper when I get

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liquor in me, Skeets. Can't you do something? If I did do it—"

Skeets said: "Keep your chin up there, Mott."

Moir Farquahar burst forth: "Can't we get out of here? Out of this house?"

Her lips were white. Her self-control was nearly gone. Skeets urged:

"Take them over to Hodge's, Marty. You can evade the mob that way. I'll sketch up here. Miss Farquahar is feeling badly. Go ahead, will you?"

Craig caught the urgency in his voice and looked doubtful. He said: "Hell, it's in the bag. Nobody but Tisdale could've done it. And he's tougher than I'd figure or he couldn't have. McDowell was a husky guy. It took a good man to sink that stilet' into him."

Skeets said: "Look, Marty. Take 'em over there and sit tight, will you?"

They went out, Craig watching Tisdale, the gun steady in his hand. Skeets waited until the girl was in the doorway, then said quietly: "I'll be right over, Miss Farquahar."

She gave him a grateful glance and went on. The housekeeper lingered behind and said: "There's things I could tell you, Mr. Detective."

"Yes," said Skeets absently. "I want you here."

"I want to see what you do," she added confidentially. "I've read about it. Do you really do it?"

Skeets grinned. He went out and got his portable kit. He spread it out, the screwdriver, compass saw, claw hammer, chisels, jimmy, shears. He arranged test tubes, brushes, files, bottles, all in a neat row upon the desk. He assembled his fingerprint roller and ostentatiously poured out tiny piles of both the black and the white powders.

Mrs. Garthwaite said with great satisfaction: "Now, that's more like it. You take pictures, too?"

"No," said Skeets. "The photographers and the M. E. will take charge of all that. They'll be here directly.

(Continued on page 106)

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(Continued from page 104)

Look—tell me something. Did anyone besides Mr. Tisdale have cause to dislike Corter McDowell?"

MR. GARTHWAITE said grimly, "There isn't a soul ever knew McDowell at all well who didn't have some grievance against him. And I've been with him ten years. I ought to know."

Skeets nodded. He said: "I thought as much. He looks like that kind of a guy."

He went over to the body and leaned close, examining the wound. The knife had been slipped straight in between the ribs, in exactly the right spot. He examined the area about the incision carefully. He nodded to himself and got the white dusting powder.

There were, he found at once, no prints on the dark handle of the stillette. Its highly polished surface had no sign of a wiping rag. He pursed his lips and stood back with his sketching tablet. He would have to have all the details for the report to headquarters.

He gathered up his kit and repacked it. Mrs. Garthwaite said: "I'll bet there's dozens of prints around."

"Sure," Skeets agreed. "The lab men'll get them. I won't need them. The case is as good as closed right now."

She said. "You mean Mr. Tisdale did it? I don't believe that."

"I didn't say," grinned Skeets. "Let's go over to Mr. Hodge's, eh? Poor Craig'll be third-degree in' the bunch if we leave him too long."

They walked up the street to Hodge's house. Skeets ushered the old lady into a room which was dimly lighted, and paused on the threshold, blinking his eyes.

It gave the effect of a large, overdone bar, he thought at once. There was chromium and leather and indirect lighting. There was black glass and a divan, low and wide, and footstools all over the place. The only chairs were tubular and angular.

(Continued on page 108)

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(Continued from page 106)

Marty Craig looked completely foolish bulking on a leather mushroom, the big gun sprouting from his fist. He said irritably:

"I c'n hear the sireens comin' up the road. This guy's practically confessed. C'mon, we're goin' down to meet him. Tisdale, you're under arrest for the murder of Corter McDowell."

Skeets said mildly: "Wait a minute, Marty. He might not have done it, you know."

Marty Craig said roughly: "Don't get collegiate on me, Perryman. This is in the bag. This is a good pinch for us."

Skeets said: "But you know there was plenty of opportunity for some one other than Mott to kill McDowell, don't you, Marty?"

"Like Mrs. Garthwaite?" said Craig disgustedly. "C'mon an' stop playin'."

"Like Mrs. Garthwaite," said Skeets. "Or Miss Farquahar. Or Mr. Hodge."

"I got a steel engravin' of 'em doin' it," snorted Craig.

"It's an easy thing to slip a knife into the ribs of an unconscious man," said Skeets. "Remember? The M. E. gave us a lecture on it. I believe you were asleep, at that."

"Unconscious? After he was kayo'd? Look, man, this young feller never kayo'd McDowell. That man was in good shape and he weighed two hundred. This guy only goes around one-sixty," protested Craig. "He had-a use that shiv to put McDowell away."

Skeets said patiently: "I went to school with Mott, Marty. He was intercollegiate light-heavy champ for two years. If he wasn't lousy rich and quit drinkin' he could stand up against Joe Louis. You oughta see him go some time."

Craig looked askance at Tisdale. He said: "Is that right?"

Tisdale said: "I told you I thought I knocked him out. With a right cross."

"A fighter," added Skeets, "would-

n't even reach for a knife. Would he, Marty?"

THE BIG DETECTIVE rose and strode the length of the room. His red face was a picture of disappointment. He growled: "Then any of 'em could've done it. Miss Farquahar admits she went into the room alone. She could've stuck it in him."

The girl cried out faintly, then was still. Skeets said: "Or Mrs. Garthwaite could've got home earlier than she says, slipped in and knifed him, slipped out again to return when the coast was clear."

The little housekeeper said: "That's good thinking, Mr. Detective. You're a bright young man."

Craig said, "You did it, then? You admit it? Well, who'd believe that?"

"Not me," said Skeets. "I favor some one else. I favor—say! Where's Hodge?"

The little man was not in the room. Craig bawled: "It's so damn dark in here I never missed him. Now what the hell—"

Skeets whirled out in the hall, drawing his gun. At the head of a flight of stairs a dim figure retreated hastily into darkness. He called:

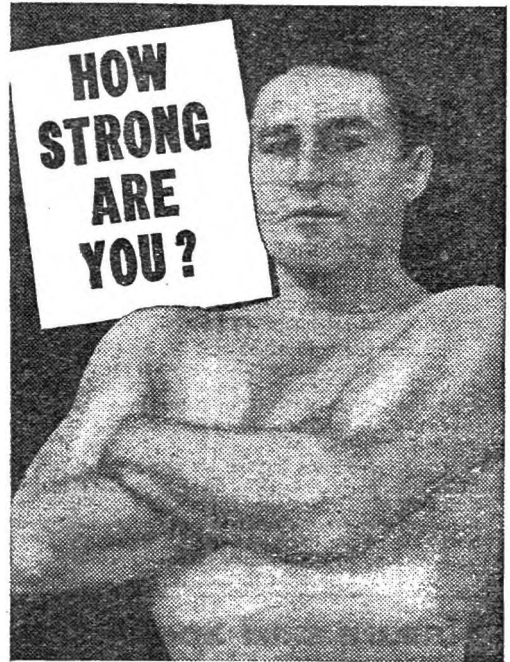
"Come down here, Hodge. I'm coming after you with a gun if you don't come down."

There was no answer. Marty Craig started for the steps. Skeets grabbed his arm and said:

"My pinch, big boy. You get the back door."

Like a well-trained automaton the big detective swung and went down the hall. Skeets took a deep breath and went piling up the stairs, three at a time.

The upper hall was empty. He tore down to an open door. He swung into the room, dropping to his knees, his gun ready. There was a crash of breaking glass. He dashed to the window and looked down. Hodge lay in a heap on the flagging of the patio. Craig lumbered around the corner and threw a flash upon the fallen man.



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He called up: "He's alive. We'll make a pinch yet. I'll call the ambulance."

Skeets made a quick tour of the upstairs rooms. He returned to the ground-floor sitting room with a bundle of clothes and a pair of French field glasses. Craig came in and said:

"The ambulance is takin' him down. Doc says he'll make the grade to burn. I gotta hand it to ya, kid. I never woulda suspected that mug."

Moirra Farquahar said: "I still can't—how could he? Where did he get the courage?"

Mrs. Garthwaite said: "McDowell had been ragging him for years. He was tortured by that man. I think McDowell sold him this house so he could have the poor little creature around to torture."

"It's simple as a b c," said Skeets. "He heard the riot. He put the field glasses on the house—I just took a look and you can still see McDowell lying there with the M. E. examining him. He saw McDowell getting licked. He called Miss Farquahar in an excess of glee so that she could see."

The girl said: "He was excited—I could almost believe with pleasure—when he called."

"Miss Farquahar did not respond properly," went on Skeets. "She went over to stop it. Hodge watched through the glasses. He saw McDowell stretched out, alone. He took the one big chance of his life and sneaked over there, got the dagger off the wall and did the deed. Then he ran back. The rain washed out his footprints. If he weren't suspected tonight he would have been perfectly safe."

HE held up the clothing and a pair of shoes. He said: "You have to understand a guy like Hodge. You see he would do everything in costume. Now, at the hour of night at which the fight took place, he would have been lounging about in a robe and slippers. You can't imagine him in any other outfit. It goes with this house. But he

couldn't commit a murder in that. So he put on the tweeds.

"Then he came back, and of course the tweeds were all wrong. Besides, they were wet. They still are. So he took them off. That's where he went wrong. He should have put on the lounging outfit again."

Craig said: "I ain't followin' you, but it sounds swell."

"So, because Miss Farquahar was coming and because he wanted to shine in her eyes, he put on that atrocious mauve business with the slacks and suede shoes which he is now wearing," finished Skeets. "Make sense?"

Craig said: "Yeah, I guess so. But how'd you come to suspect him? Not on that clothes business?"

"Well, there was the wound," said Skeets. "You didn't examine it, Marty, or you'd have got that."

"What was wrong with it?"

"There were four cuts," said Skeets. "The fifth was the spot where the knife sunk in."

Craig snapped his fingers. He said: "Like a suicide. Couldn't find the way in. Kept hittin' ribs."

"That's it. Hodge was nervous and ignorant of physiology. He pried about with the stiletto until he found the intercostal space, bungling the job," said Skeets.

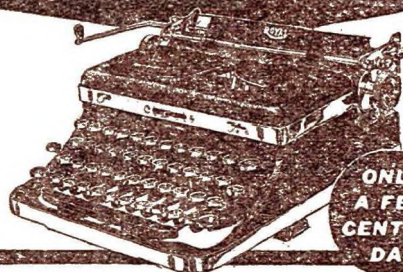
Craig said reluctantly, "You was thorough, kid. It was good cop work."

"Besides," Skeets concluded, "I looked at the haft of the stiletto. It wasn't wiped. The guy had used gloves. Miss Farquahar had no gloves. Neither did Mrs. Garthwaite. And I know Mott didn't use them to fight McDowell. Of course, Hodge would own them."

He tossed a pair of yellow gloves on the table. He said: "You know, Marty, they take latent prints from leather these days. We can burn that guy."

Mott Tisdale had recovered his color and his aplomb. He said: "Skeets, you're the berries. I'm sorry I had to ever beat you out of that championship, back at school."

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Craig said: "You too, kid? An' me askin' for it today."

"If I can ever do anything for you, Skeets," Mott said earnestly.

"You might," said Skeets easily, "introduce me to your fiancée. Properly, I mean. I'd hate to have her think of me as a cop all the time."

Marty Craig watched fascinatedly while Tisdale formally presented Noah Perryman to Moira Farquahar. The girl said:

"You were rather wonderful, Mr. Perryman. And Mott is not my fiancé, you know. Just a dear friend. That was Mr. McDowell's mistake. Don't you make it, too."

Skeets bowed. "Mott's loss. May I hope, then, to see you sometime—unofficially?"

She said: "I'm in the book. You only need a nickel to make a call."

She was smiling, and her brown eyes were warm with admiration. Skeets made polite noises. Mott Tisdale made polite noises. Moira Farquahar regally allowed them to escort her from the house and to her smart sedan. Marty Craig brought up dazedly in the rear. The siren of the ambulance wailed going down the hill. The McDowell case was closed.

In the little department car going back to headquarters, Skeets made notes in his black book. Suddenly Marty Craig said:

"Kid, I take it all back. A college education is okay. I seen it work and I'm convinced."

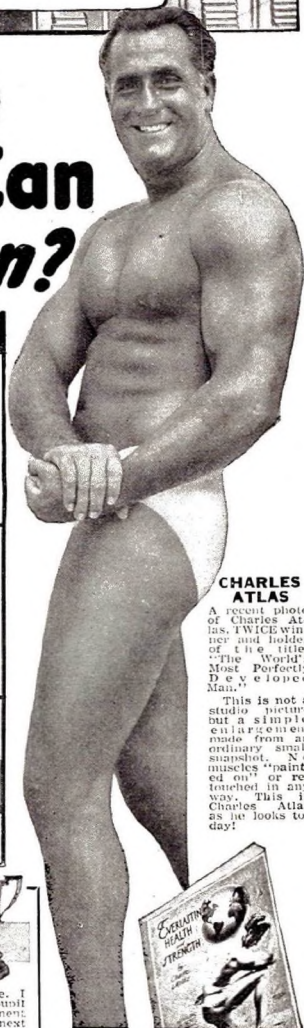
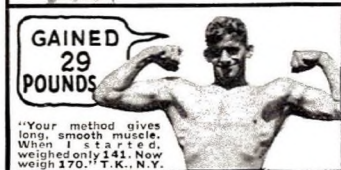
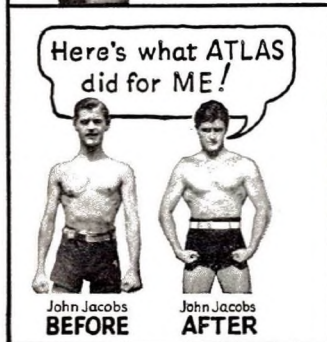
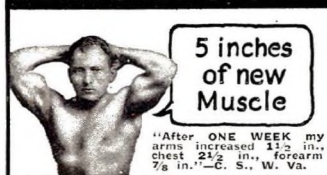
"Don't be a pushover," grinned Skeets. "If the thing hadn't seemed open and shut on Mott's own story, you'd have cracked it. I just know that kind of people. Might not be a case like that again in a year—or ten years."

"The hell with the case," said Craig. "That was all right. Damn good work. But that ain't nothin'. It's the smooch, kid, the smooch. When a college education can get a guy in with a gal like that as smooth as you made it—ain't they got night colleges for mugs like me?"



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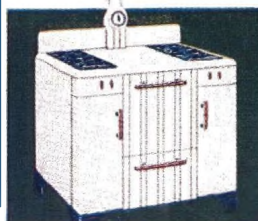
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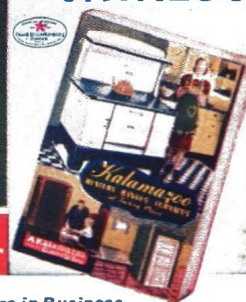
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