FALL 25¢

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CANCELLED in RED

by Hugh Pentecost

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The STRAW MEN Murders

by Alexander Campbell

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TRIPLE DETECTIVE

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Vol. 4, No. 2 A THRILLING PUBLICATION Fall Issue

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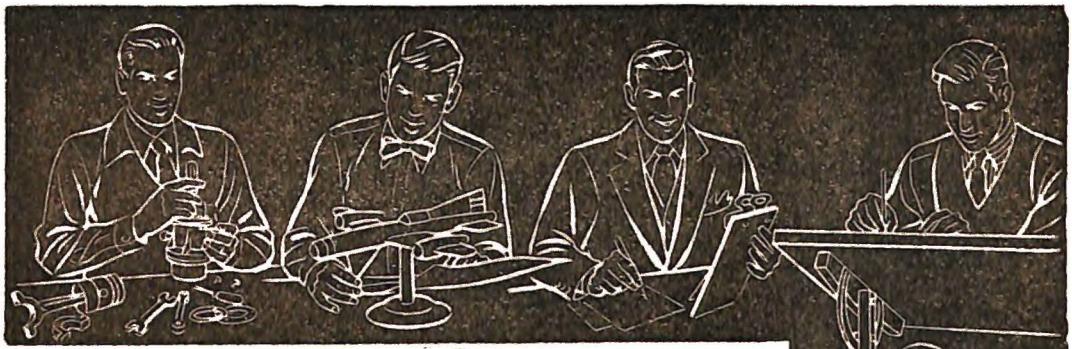

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A Panel of Mystery Fans, Authors and the Editor

LIFE in the country is usually serene and peaceful. There is no wild rush of pedestrians, no thunderous roar of subways, no hooting of taxicabs. Country people take their time in their work and play. They don't cultivate ulcers like the nervous, high-strung urbanites. They are neighborly, even if the nearest neighbor is a mile down the road.

In the summer Nature is in full bloom in the country with trees and shrubs and flowers all alive with bright color. Usually there is a breeze and full freedom from the steaming, humid, smoke-laden heat of the cities.

Yes, the country is the place to live. And for a doctor it's ideal. He can make the rounds of his patients without bustle or confusion and—well, it's just a nice life.

Healthy—Except for Murder!

That's why Dr. Westlake had always liked Kenmore Valley. It was lovely country and had always been healthy—except for a couple of murder victims that had, in past, involved the doctor up to his ears in unofficial criminal investigation.

It had happened before and, with Christmas approaching, it was due to happen again: The peace and serenity of Kenmore Valley was about to be broken—though Dr. Westlake didn't know it—by a macabre murder plot that began with the frantic visit of a red-haired girl to the doctor's office and the specter of a mysterious yellow cab!

The whole grim and exciting story will be found in "The Yellow Taxi" by Jonathan Stagge, which headlines the forthcoming issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE. It's an eerie, hair-raising novel that will win many new friends for Jonathan Stagge's likable sleuth, Dr. Westlake, and his mischievous daughter, Dawn.

Two more topnotch novels, "I Found Him Dead" by Gale Gallagher and "Murder at London's Gate" by John Creasey round out our trio of books to be featured in the next issue. And remember, that all three books will be expertly abridged for faster and more entertaining reading.

Turning back to "The Yellow Taxi" by Jonathan Stagge, the story opens a few days before Christmas with pretty Norma Hale visiting Dr. Westlake and asking him for a sleeping prescription. She was the step-daughter of the Rowleys who had just taken over the beautiful estate of Fallowfield.

Mysterious Terror

Norma Hale was distraught and shaken. She confessed that she was bothered by something that had occurred long ago and which she could not erase from her mind. She refused to reveal what it was, but admitted that she had done something which hurt several people and one of them had neither forgotten or forgiven.

In her terror she blurted out to Dr. Westlake that she continually dreamed of a New York yellow taxi and of its hideous driver with a crooked mouth.

"For months now I've been dreaming about him," she said. "The yellow taxi creeps up the road toward me, slowly, and I know it's going to catch up with me." She shivered and added. "But it isn't a dream any more. It's real. I've seen the yellow taxi here in Kenmore!"

Dr Westlake's lifted eyebrows told Norma Hale that he did not give much credence to her tale. But his eyes turned more serious when she told him that her girl friend, Libby Brompton, had died recently—appar-

ently in a fall from a high cliff. And Libby had seen the yellow taxi the day before she died!

For that reason Norma Hale believed she was in danger of her life. When Westlake suggested the police she said she couldn't go to them because she couldn't bear to tell them the terrible thing she had done in the past and which was at the root of her trouble.

The doctor shrugged, finally gave her a prescription and saw her to the door. She had ridden up on horseback. She climbed into the saddle quickly and rode away down the lane. And then, as Dr. Westlake watched, he saw an automobile drive past the entrance to his driveway. The car was a yellow taxi!

A Turmoil of Violence

This is the eerie, pulse-tingling opening of Jonathan Stagge's exciting novel, "The Yellow Taxi." From that moment all of Kenmore Valley was turned into a turmoil of concealed violence, rampant fears and slowly encroaching horror. Before the very night was over Dr. Westlake and his daughter paid a visit to the Rowleys. They found the Rowleys stringing lights on the Christmas trees in their driveway.

And as they watched they heard the thunder of hoofs pounding along the earth. Then they saw the redheaded girl come dashing up the lane on a spirited horse. Her twin sister, Karen, whom the Westlakes had just met, cried out:

"Norma. You idiot! Not so fast!"

As Karen's voice died out, Norma's galloping horse suddenly reared high, whinnying shrilly. There was a single, piercing scream. Then Norma toppled backward out of the saddle.

Dr. Westlake, running forward, looked toward the end of the lane. He heard a faint throbbing sound, then saw the yellow taxi glide away into the darkness.

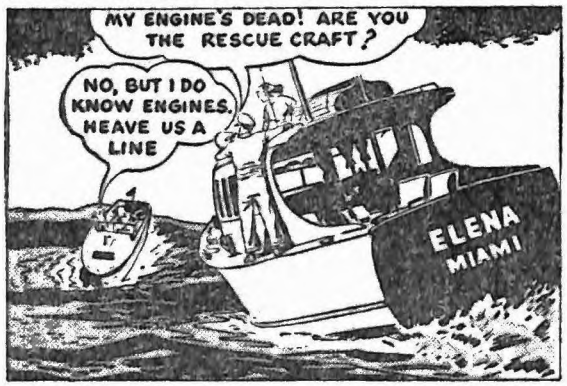
There you are, fans! We defy you to resist this absorbing novel. It will hold your interest to the very last page. So look for "The Yellow Taxi" in the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE.

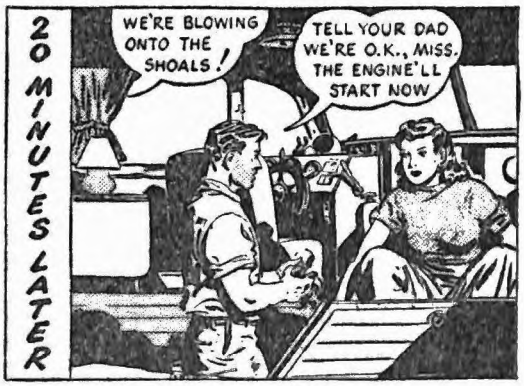
"I Found Him Dead" by Gale Gallagher, the second of our three forthcoming novels, is a tale of intrigue and terror and cruel scheming revolving around the comely

(Continued on page 156)

JACK PLAYED IN LUCK WHEN...

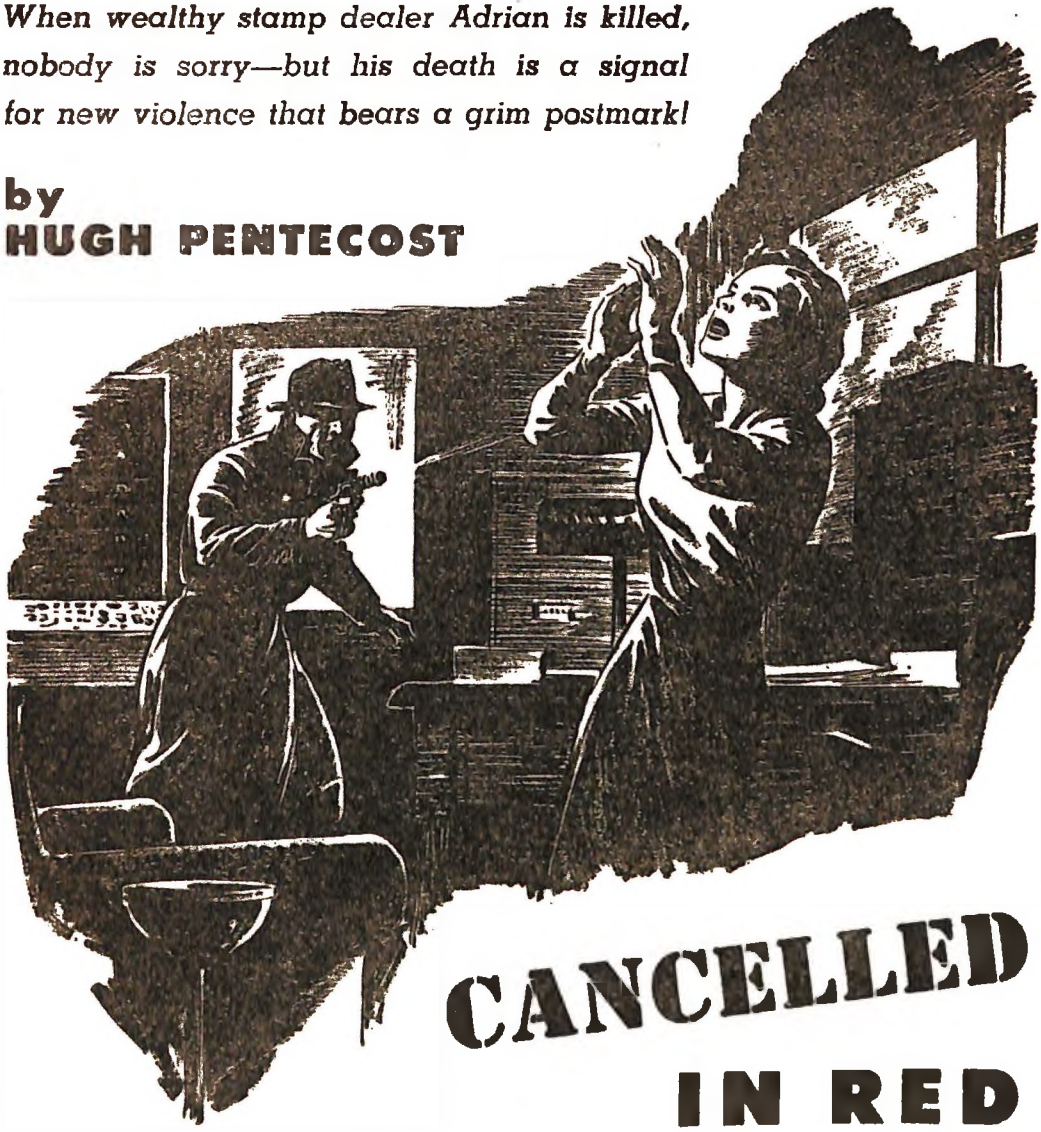
JACK LEVEL AND LOU McKIEL, EX-SEABEES, ARE ON THE SECOND DAY OF A ROUGH RUN DOWN THE COAST IN THEIR NEWLY-PURCHASED SECONDHAND BOAT, WHEN..





When wealthy stamp dealer Adrian is killed, nobody is sorry—but his death is a signal for new violence that bears a grim postmark!

by HUGH PENTECOST



CANCELLED IN RED

an Inspector Luke Bradley novel

I

THE main office of Lawrence Storm, Inc., of 64½ Nassau Street, was a long, narrow room with two windows at the far end. If the building boasted a window cleaner, he had neglected Mr. Storm's office for a long time. Across the front end stretched a wide counter, glass-covered, while beyond the counter was a large, old-fashioned safe, its door standing open. It seemed to contain nothing but a collection of unwieldly looking books. These books were filled with postage stamps. Mr. Lawrence Storm was a stamp broker.

At the far end by the windows were two flat-topped, wooden desks. At one

Larry Storm Joins Luke Bradley on a Trail of

of these sat a girl with naturally curly blond hair, clear hazel eyes, and a humorous little mouth painted bright red. As Mr. Storm came in she looked up quickly from her work.

"Hi!" said Mr. Storm.

"Hi, teacher!" said Ellen Dixon.

Mr. Storm's attention was then taken up by other matters. Standing behind the counter was a boy of about fifteen. He was tall for his age, and his clothes had not quite kept up with him. On the customer's side of the counter, with a newsboy's canvas bag slung over his shoulder, was another boy of about the same age. His face was a replica of the map of Ireland, pug nose, aggressive chin, and all. A little pile of stamps lay on the counter.

A look of suspicion entered Mr. Storm's blue eyes. He dropped a hand on the customer's shoulder. "How's tricks, Mickey? Adding to your collection?"

"Gee, yes, Mr. Storm," said Mickey Hogan. "Bones has got some 'specially rare items for me."

"I see," said Mr. Storm. "Let's have a look."

Mickey picked up one of the stamps, almost reverently. "This is one of the Trans-Mississippi issue," he said, eagerly. "But it's a rare one, Mr. Storm. It's so rare it isn't even listed in Scott's catalogue."

"I see," said Mr. Storm. "And what is so rare about it, Mickey?"

"Well, this was part of a regular, perforated issue," said Mickey. "But there must have been a slip-up somewhere, because this stamp has no perforations at all."

"Ah," said Mr. Storm, dryly, "that *does* make it a rarity. And how much is Bones asking you for this hitherto undiscovered specimen?"

MICKEY looked uncomfortable. "Well, sir, it's listed at forty cents in Scott's—I mean the regular one. But Bones is goin' to let me have the special one for only a buck. I guess I'm mighty lucky."

"You're lucky," said Mr. Storm, "to get out of here with the fillings in your teeth." He picked up the hitherto unheard-of, unperforated Trans-Mississippi. "Look, Mickey. There never was any such freak. If there were, it would be worth hundreds, maybe thousands, of dollars. I think, if you'll examine the wastebasket, you'll discover evidence that our friend Bones has carefully cut the perforations off an ordinary stamp."

Mickey stared at Mr. Storm for an instant. "So he was trying to sell me a phony?"

"And how!" said Mr. Storm.

"Why, you dirty rat." Mickey shouted. He made a dive across the counter toward Bones. Mr. Storm took him by the shoulder and pulled him back.

"We'll have no homicide in here, Mickey," he said. "You can wait for Bones when he leaves tonight. I hope this unfortunate affair won't destroy your faith in Lawrence Storm, Inc. Any time you want to buy anything I'll be glad to attend to you personally," he added, gravely.

"Gee, thanks, Mr. Storm," said Mickey. Then he turned to Bones. "Watch yerself, Kelly, when I get you outside!"

Mr. Storm lifted a hinged section of the counter and let himself into the main office. "I don't understand you, Ellen," he said. "You sit here and allow Bones to gyp a customer. Sixty cents is just as much to Mickey as six thousand might be to someone like Jasper Hale."

Ellen Dixon looked up. "Of course I knew what was going on," she said. "But I was recalling that Mickey sold Bones a Leica camera the other day at the amazing bargain price of three dollars. Only it didn't have any lens. I thought Mickey had something coming to him."

Mr. Storm rested a hand on Bones' shoulder. "Okay, fella," he grinned. "I don't give a rap what kind of a deal you put over on Mickey as long as it isn't stamps. Stamps are our business, and we play on the level—even with Mickey. "Get it?" He turned to Ellen Dixon. "Anything happen while I was out to lunch?"

"I've got a surprise for you," Ellen said. "There's a pretty girl waiting for you in your office."

"She's not pretty if you picked her out for me," said Larry Storm. "I don't

want to see her, whoever she is. I've got to finish pricing that Hoffenstein collection. Don't I pay you to keep people out of my hair?"

"I decided you'd better see her," said Ellen. "She's the daughter of an old client of yours, Colonel Warren. She seems to be upset about something. I thought you could do a better job of soothing than I could."

INSPECTOR LUKE BRADLEY

"How right you are, my sweet," said Larry.

He handed his hat and coat to Bones, walked across to the door of his private office and went in.

Ellen had been right. Lucia Warren was pretty. "This is a great pleasure, Miss Warren," Larry said. "Your father was a very old friend of mine."

"I wonder," said Lucia Warren. She was tall and dark, and her voice was low and throaty, attractive. But it was definitely hostile. "Father often said you were one of the few honest brokers in the stamp business. But quite recently, Mr. Storm, I've had reason to wonder if Father was right."

Larry sat down at his desk. "Maybe you'd better tell me just what it's all about," he said, "before I start to protest."

"Did you know that my father's collection was put up at auction last week?" Miss Warren asked.

"I knew," Larry admitted. "Unfortunately I couldn't be on hand. I was at a convention of the Philatelic Society in New Orleans."

"Father invested about a quarter of a million dollars in his collection, mostly through you," said Lucia Warren. "He looked on stamps as an investment, just as other men look on stocks and bonds."

LARRY shrugged. "A lot of people have that idea, Miss Warren. I'm afraid it's usually a mistaken one. Stamps are primarily a hobby. The salvage value on a collection is rarely anything like its cost to the collector."

"Would you think fifty thousand dollars was a fair salvage value for my father's collection?"

Larry sat up in his chair. "Lord, no!" he said. "I sold him stamps myself worth more than that in any market!"

"It's about those stamps I came to see you." Lucia opened her handbag and took out a slip of paper. "You sold my father an Eighteen-Seventy-Three Jackson double impression for eighteen hundred dollars. It is listed in Scott's catalogue at two thousand dollars. That stamp, Mr. Storm, brought four hundred and fifty dollars at the auction. Is that a fair salvage value? And that is only one of dozens of similar discrepancies."

"Who auctioned the collection for you?" demanded Larry.

"Max Adrian."

Larry groaned. "Adrian is a crook!"

"That," said Lucia, "is what he says about you. He says you passed off a lot of worthless items on my father."

"He would!" Larry's eyes were hard. "You've been to his office? You've seen his set-up—modernistic furniture, receptionists, a special Inspection Room for the customer."

"Yes."

"This office must have surprised you then."

"It did," admitted Lucia. "Father said your business was worth at least half a million dollars."

"The customers don't pay for over-

head here," said Larry. "Adrian runs what we call a bucket shop. It's a trap for suckers." He leaned forward. "I think I can explain just how you've been rooked. Your father's executors turned over the collection to Adrian some time before the auction so that prospective buyers could examine it, didn't they?"

"They did."

"Your father's executors know nothing about stamps. Right?"

"Yes."

"All they had was a list of what the collection contained—a list which said, for example: 'One U. S. Number One-Five-Seven-d, double impression Jackson.' Right?"

"Right."

Larry smiled. "Now watch closely. I have nothing up my sleeve. One *uncancelled* Jackson double impression in perfect condition is worth two thousand dollars, maybe more. But a *cancelled* Jackson double impression in good shape is only worth about six hundred dollars. If it was slightly damaged, it might bring about four hundred and fifty dollars, which is what you got for it. In other words, Adrian removed a fine, uncancelled specimen from the collection, replaced it with a slightly frayed cancelled item, got the auction commission for the substituted stamp and probably still has the two-thousand-dollar one which he will sell in time to some one at full value."

"But that's downright swindling!" Lucia exclaimed.

"Exactly," said Larry. "The only way to prove it, though, is to go in for safe-breaking and find the stolen items in Adrian's possession."

"Can't we get a search warrant? Surely there's a remedy!"

"No evidence. Adrian would simply say that all collectors overestimate the value of their collections and that your father was no exception." Larry shook his head. "I'd like to help you," he said. "I've been waiting a long time for a chance to nail Adrian."

"Why? Has he done something to you?"

Larry's face clouded. "Not directly. But he gave a friend of mine, named Lon Nicholas, a pretty thorough going over. Lon has been fascinated by stamps all his life, and about three years ago he amassed enough capital by the sweat of his brow to go into business as a stamp broker. He was interested only in rare and expensive items."

"So?"

LUCIA stared intently at Larry who took his time before answering.

"Brokers have numerous methods of dealing with clients," said Larry. "When a client has a good credit standing we often send him stamps for inspection without any money changing hands. The client looks them over, and if he decides to buy, pays for them. If he doesn't want them, he sends them back."

"I see."

"The best credit references in the world in such cases are other brokers. Well, a guy who called himself Oscar Rivero began buying stamps through the mail from reputable dealers. I was one of them. Well, one day Lon Nicholas called me and asked about Rivero's credit. Rivero wanted to see some stamps on approval. I told Lon he had always been on the level with me and had been buying for six months or more. So Lon sent Mr. Rivero about forty thousand dollars' worth of stuff on consignment, on my say so!" Larry's lips tightened. "Then Mr. Rivero disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

"There wasn't any such guy," Larry said grimly. "His mailing address turned out to be a rooming house, but Mr. Rivero had never actually lived in the room he rented. He had simply come to it for his mail. He disappeared into the blue with Lon's stamps. It smashed Lon, tossed him out of business."

"But what has that to do with Adrian?"

"I've never been able to get any evidence," said Larry, "but I've always thought that Adrian was Oscar Rivero. Now, go home, Miss Warren, and get your father's catalogue. Meanwhile I'll dig up my own records. Come back here about six and we'll go over them and see just how badly you've been taken. Then I'll buy you dinner. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," she agreed, and just then Ellen Dixon's clear voice came through the interoffice communicator.

"Mr. Julius! Duck!"

Larry took Lucia's arm, turned her quickly around, and literally pushed her through a curtained doorway into a small pitch-black room, where he kept his violet-ray lamp and other equipment

for the examination of stamps.

"Please, if you love me, be quiet till this old screwball leaves!" he whispered, and Lucia, finding herself in complete darkness, with Larry's arm around her shoulder, was too amazed to reply.

Meanwhile, in the outer office, an old gentleman had stepped just inside the front door. He was carrying a bone-handled umbrella while from the left-hand pocket of his overcoat a long, black metal ear trumpet protruded.

"Bones," said Ellen Dixon, "see what Mr. Julius wants."

Surprisingly Mr. Julius answered that question himself, although the metal ear trumpet still remained in his pocket. "You know very well what I want, Ellen Dixon! I want to know if Storm is here. Because if he is, I won't set foot in the place!"

Bones crossed the office and raised the hinged section of the counter. "Come in, Mr. Julius. Larry isn't here!"

"*What?*" Mr. Julius demanded. He wrenched the ear trumpet from his pocket and pointed the horn end at Bones. "For heaven's sake, speak up, my boy!"

"I say it's all right, Mr. Julius. *Larry isn't here!*"

"Don't shout!" commanded Mr. Julius. "I'll see for myself!" He stamped across the room, flung open the office door, and peered around suspiciously. Then he turned to Ellen. "Well, do I have to stand here all day?"

"What can I do for you, Mr. Julius?" Ellen asked camly.

MR. JULIUS banged his umbrella on the floor. "What can you do for me? You still sell stamps, don't you? Think I came to buy a musical instrument?"

"Sit down here at my desk," said Ellen, soothingly, "and tell me what you want to see." She held a chair for him and he sat down, placing hat, umbrella, and ear trumpet on the desk in front of him.

"Thing I can't understand," he growled, "is how a well mannered young woman like you can work for a crook like Storm." His old eyes narrowed. "Not in love with him, are you?"

"Please tell me what you want to see?" repeated Ellen, ignoring his question.

"She asks me what I want to see!

Lacy paid the driver and helped Lon out of the cab. (Chap. II)

Have I ever been interested in anything except South American issues?" Then as Ellen went over to the safe and took out a large, heavy volume, he continued, "Now none of your cripples! None of your repaired items! No stolen goods!"

Ellen brought the stock book back and put it down on the desk. He opened it and began turning the pages rapidly. "Humph!" he snorted. "Just as I thought! A lot of worthless junk!"

The phone on Ellen's desk rang and she answered it. When she hung up the receiver she was frowning.

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius, without looking up. Then, after another moment, he said, decisively, "I'll take these four. Don't tell me how much! I saw the listings in the stock book!" He reached into his pocket and produced a huge, over-stuffed wallet. "And may the Lord forgive you for robbing an old man!"

Ellen put his purchases in an envelope. "It's always nice to see you, Mr. Julius," she said.

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Julius. He gathered up his belongings and stalked across the office to the outside door. "You can tell Storm to come out of that dark room where he's been hiding," he said. "Good-by!"

He went out, slamming the door with dangerous force. Ellen went directly to Larry's office. Larry and Lucia were just emerging from the dark room.

Ellen's tone was worried. "Larry, Max Adrian's office just phoned. Lon Nicholas is in a jam. They want you to go over there and get him."

Larry's lips tightened. He turned to Lucia. "I'll see you here at six?"

"I'll be here," she told him.

II

IN THE big, upholstered armchair next to the desk in Max Adrian's impossibly modernistic office, sprawled the figure of Lon Nicholas. His head was turned to one side, revealing an ugly bruise near his temple and a little trickle of blood oozing from one corner of his mouth.

Adrian, a huge man who must have weighed two hundred and eighty pounds, waved a fat hand in Lon's direction. "Nice looking specimen, your friend," he said to Larry.

Storm was cold with anger. "What happened?" he demanded.

"The whimpering little punk was going to kill me," said Adrian, elaborately casual. "So I hit him with a paperweight."

Larry turned to Adrian's assistant. "Get a towel, Louderbach. Wet it with cold water."

Louderbach looked questioningly at Adrian, through thick-lensed spectacles.

"*Get it!*" Larry said, so sharply that Louderbach jumped. Larry turned back to Lon and spoke gently.

"What happened, fella?" he asked.

"I muffed it," Lon repeated, bitterly, his eyes closed. "Like a fool—I stood here talking to him. I should have let him have it!"

Larry, looking at a table that stood against the wall, saw a revolver lying there. He glanced at Adrian.

"He was going to use it, all right," said the fat man, "I was too quick for him."

"Why, Lon?" Larry asked, gently.

Lon moved in the chair as if his whole body pained him. "Rivero," he groaned. "He's Oscar Rivero!"

"You've proof, Lon?" Larry's fingers gripped his arm.

Lon shook his head. Louderbach returned with a damp towel. Larry wiped the blood from Lon's mouth and bathed the bruise on the side of his head.

"Have you sent for the police?" Larry asked Adrian.

"No."

"Why not?"

The fat man shrugged.

"It couldn't be that you're not interested in having the Rivero case revived, could it?" Larry asked. "Then there's Lucia Warren. She just left my office."

Adrian's huge paunch shook. "So you're tossing that in my lap too, eh? How I laughed when she came crying to me. The noble Larry Storm had sold her father on a bunch of junk! Well, I'm not taking the rap. If you can prove I'm Oscar Rivero, you can take over where Houdini left off! Now, get your blubbering friend out of here."

"Okay, Max," said Larry softly. "You've asked for it. I'm turning on the heat and I'll keep it on till you're out of town, or up the river."

The office door opened and two men walked in. The first man, tall and broad shouldered, had bright red, close-

cropped hair. "My name is Bradley," he said. "Inspector, Homicide Division. Some one phoned us there was trouble here."

Adrian addressed his clerk. "Louderbach, did you call the police?" he demanded.

"No, Mr. Adrian."

The fat man turned to his receptionist standing in the doorway. "*You?*"

"I h-heard him threaten you, Mr. Adrian! I thought it best."

"You're not supposed to think," Adrian said. "You're supposed to run a switchboard. Get out!" He faced Bradley. "There's been a mistake, Inspector. Sorry you had the trouble."

LARRY, his face expressionless, had meanwhile moved over to the little table near the wall where Lon's revolver lay. He got between it and the inspector, and then unobtrusively slipped the gun into his pocket. Lon moved his head and groaned. Bradley nodded toward the armchair.

"Your friend badly hurt?" he asked.

"It's nothing," said Adrian. "He fell —I—it's nothing."

"Looks like a false alarm, Rube," Bradley said to his companion. "Wait for me down in the car." The man grunted and went out, but Bradley himself made no move to leave. Larry saw that he was looking at the glass paperweight which no one had picked up from the rug.

"Let's see," he said thoughtfully, "first he was struck with the paperweight. Then somebody slugged or kicked him in the side of the head. Maybe I shouldn't go away and leave him to your tender mercies."

"It's all right, Inspector," Larry said. "I was on the point of taking him home when you arrived. My friend was drunk. He had an argument with Mr. Adrian, who slugged him. But I don't think either one of them will prefer charges."

Adrian laughed. "The whole thing's an unfortunate mistake," he repeated to Bradley. "I'm sorry you've had the trouble."

Bradley nodded slowly. He turned to Larry. "Can I help you downstairs with your friend?"

"Thanks," said Larry.

On the main floor Bradley's assistant was waiting. He called a taxi, and when it drew up at the curb the inspector helped Larry get Lon settled on the back seat.

Then Larry turned to him.

"You've been very decent, Bradley. Thanks."

Bradley smiled. "I hate to have you go away thinking I'm a nit-wit," he said.

"Why should I think that, Inspector?" Larry said and laughed.

"Because I didn't do anything about that revolver you were at some pains to slip into your coat pocket. Obviously it belonged to your friend. You better keep him out of trouble."

"I will," Larry assured him.

"And," Bradley's clear gray eyes returned to Larry's face, "it's bad practice to threaten people in front of witnesses as I heard you threatening Mr. Adrian. Suppose something should happen to him? Your position wouldn't be nice." He sighed. "Well, good-by."

"Be seeing you," Larry said.

The inspector shook his head. "I hope not!" he murmured.

When the taxi drew up in front of the apartment house on Gramercy Park where Larry lived, Larry storm paid the driver and then helped Lon out. They walked through the entrance hall. Larry spoke to the switchboard operator and after they reached Storm's apartment, he ushered Lon into the living room.

"The first thing you do, my lad," said Larry, cheerfully, "is to get under a steaming hot shower. I'll dig up something for you to eat while you're at it. After that, bed and rest. I've sent for Bones. He'll stay here with you, see that you're not disturbed."

Lon smiled. "I—I guess you're the doctor," he said.

He stayed in the bath a long time, so long that the coffee was done when the shower stopped running. Larry brought the coffee pot in from the kitchen and placed it on the tray. He reached for his cigarette case and matches, and his right hand closed over the revolver which he had removed from Adrian's office. He took it out and examined it. The chambers were all loaded. He removed the bullets and dropped them back in his pocket. Then he walked over to his desk, opened a drawer, and shoved the gun inside. He did not see Lon in the doorway, staring at the desk drawer. . . .

BONES arrived just as Lon had finished eating. Larry beckoned him into the foyer and explained what had happened. "I don't want him to leave the apartment," he concluded. "Give him anything he wants—a drink, cigarettes, food. But keep him here!"

"Okay, boss. You can count on me."

"I know it," Larry said. He went back into the living room. "I'm going to the office, Lon. Bones will be here if you need anything. I may not be back till late, because I'm having dinner with the Warren girl. But when I see you I'll have something figured out."

Lon didn't look up. "You've been swell, Larry," he said.

When Larry entered his office Ellen Dixon came across the room to greet him. To her also he outlined the situation.

"How jolly," said Ellen. "And you're quite satisfied to leave a homicidal drunk to the care of a fifteen-year-old boy?"

"Lon's so weak Bones could push him over with his little finger."

"What a comfort," Ellen said. "Meanwhile our business goes on as usual. There's a customer in your office."

"I can't see anyone," Larry protested.

"I think you'll see this one," said Ellen. "He's Mr. Paul Gregory."

"Never heard of him."

"Perhaps you don't feel very well," Ellen said. "Paul Gregory is Jasper Hale's secretary. Jasper Hale is the biggest collector in New York. You've wanted to get Hale for a customer for years. Remember?"

Larry shrugged. "I suppose I'd better see him," he said. "But if he stays more than fifteen minutes, rescue me."

Mr. Paul Gregory was not an impressive-looking person. His eyes were pale and watery, and a little brown moustache under his nose was meant to distract attention from a small, weak mouth and a chin that rapidly receded away to nowhere. His face as Larry entered the private office was damp with perspiration.

"Hello," Larry said. "What can I do for you?" he asked.

Mr. Gregory seemed to be wringing out the handkerchief between his thick fingers. "I came to see you, Mr. Storm, because I am in great trouble," he said. "I have the care of Mr. Hale's collection, and of course I handle a great many of his stamps. Yesterday a tragedy occurred. Accidentally, I destroyed one of the most valuable items in his collection. If he finds that out, Mr. Storm, I'm ruined!"

"I see," said Larry. "And why have you come to me?"

"Because you have the reputation of being an honest broker, Mr. Storm. I have often urged Mr. Hale to transact a part of his business with you." His voice became confidential. "And if you can help me now, I can promise that some of his business *will* come your way!"

Larry inhaled deeply. "Maybe you'd better go somewhere else for help, Mr. Gregory. I have a distinct aversion to being bribed."

"Please!" said Mr. Gregory. "Forget what I said. I can't go to the dealers with whom Mr. Hale does business because they would surely tell him what has happened. I came to you because I thought you were the one man who could both replace the stamp and be trusted to keep silent about the whole affair."

"What was the stamp you destroyed?" Larry asked.

Gregory swallowed hard. "A perfect U. S. Number twenty-two, the green St. Louis Bear."

Larry whistled. "That's a twenty-five-hundred-dollar stamp, and perfect ones are rare as hen's teeth. It might take time to get one."

This seemed to throw Mr. Gregory into a state of terror. "But I must have it quickly! On Friday night Mr. Hale has a famous European collector coming to see him. He'll show his collection. He'll discover that the green Bear is missing. And then—then—" Mr. Gregory pulled a large roll of bills from his pocket, and began peeling them off in a kind of frenzy. "Pay any price you have to," he urged. "Go as high as thirty-five hundred, even four thousand if you must. But *get* it!"

LARRY looked at Gregory speculatively for a moment. "I'll do what I can for you, Gregory, but you know as well as I do that the chance of finding a perfect specimen is no cinch. Still—"

"And you won't let this get back to Mr. Hale?" Gregory interrupted anxiously. "My life is literally in your hands, Mr. Storm."

"Reach!" repeated the detective grimly, and Larry Storm raised his hands (Chap. III)

"You can count on me," said Larry.

Mr. Gregory shuffled away and out of the office. A moment later Ellen Dixon appeared in the doorway.

"Any luck?" she asked.

Larry eyed the end of the cigarette he had just lighted. "There's something putrid about Mr. Gregory and his whole story," he said, but all the same he reached for the telephone and made several calls to other dealers. Each time he asked the same question. "Know where I can pick up a perfect U. S. Number twenty-two, the green St. Louis Bear?"

It wasn't till he made his fourth call that he got a lead. "I don't know of any for sale," said Spencer, a neighboring dealer. "But there's a guy named Howard Stevens who has specialized in U. S. Stamps and who's now trying to sell his collection. I've never seen it, but it's just possible he might have a twenty-two. He hangs out around the Collectors' Club."

"Thanks, Spence. I'll do something for you sometime." Larry hung up, glanced at his watch which said a quarter to five, and turned to his secretary.

"Look, Ellen, would you mind waiting for Miss Warren?" he said. "I'm going over to the Collectors' Club."

It was a quarter to six when Larry entered the Smoke Room in the Collectors' Club and strode over to the bar.

"A Scotch and soda, Mac. By the way, do you know a Mr. Howard Stevens? I believe he's a member."

The bartender made a face. "Sure I know him," he said.

"Is he around the club now?"

"He's in the washroom."

Larry finished his drink and walked over to the washroom door. He went in, and as he did he saw a man leaning with his back against one of the wash basins smoking a long, thin cigar. He was a short, swarthy man, with very shrewd black eyes and a beaklike nose. Larry recognized him as Ezra Luckman, a collector of Newfoundland issues. Luckman looked up at Larry and waved his cigar in greeting.

"Hello, Storm, how's tricks?" Then from beyond the swinging doors that led into the second section of the wash room came the unmistakable sounds of some one being ill. "Howard Stevens," said Luckman, as if that explained everything.

"I was looking for him," said Larry.

"Better put it off till another day," said Luckman. "Stevens is sick."

The sounds from the other side of the wicker doors indicated that there was a certain amount of truth in Luckman's statement.

"Drunk?" inquired Larry.

Luckman shook his head. "No, his is a case of mind and medicine over health. He's a walking drug store. As soon as anything upsets him, he takes about six different kinds of pills and is promptly sick as a dog."

"What's upset him?" Larry asked.

Luckman smiled, a tight-lipped smile. "Mr. Stevens," he said, dryly, "has just taken one of the world's finest rookings. He went broke recently and decided to sell his collection."

"Ah," said Larry. "Low salvage value, eh?"

Luckman smiled again. "Listen!" he said, "Stevens spent over seventeen grand for his collection. He had about a thousand dollars' worth of uncancelled stamps—I mean face value. He tried to sell the lot to Scott and Morganthau and a couple of other big dealers. They wouldn't make an offer, although they agreed to act as auctioneers for him."

"So what?"

"So he sells the whole collection for six hundred bucks—cash! Six hundred bucks! With a thousand dollars' worth of stamps that could have been used for postage or been redeemed at any bank for their face value!"

"Who made him this magnanimous offer?" Larry asked.

THE smile left Luckman's thin lips. "Max Adrian," he said and his voice was suddenly harsh. "Of course there's nothing technically dishonest about it," Luckman went on. "But it was a swine's trick, all the same. Stevens needs all the dough he can get his hands on."

"It's funny," Larry said, "but that's the third time today I've heard a tale about Adrian."

Luckman's teeth clamped tightly over the end of his cigar. "Adrian's riding for a fall," he said.

"Has he done something to you?"

Luckman looked at Larry. "If he had," he said, "I'd know *exactly* how to deal with him."

Evidently Luckman wasn't going to talk. Larry glanced toward the swinging doors, from behind which still came sounds of agony.

"Get him some ginger ale with the white of an egg mixed in," he said. "That'll fix him."

Larry left Luckman and went to the telephone booth in the Smoke Room. He dropped a nickel in the slot, and dialed his office. The bell at the other end rang hopefully, but there was no answer.

"Hang that girl!" said Larry and called his apartment. The phone was answered almost immediately. It was Ellen. "For the love of Pete, what are you doing there?" Larry demanded.

"Lon's gone, Larry!" Ellen said.

"What!"

"He's gone. I got worried about Bones being alone with him and I phoned. Nobody answered. So I came up here and let myself in with your extra key. Lon had asked Bones to get him something in the bathroom, and then locked him in! Lon's skipped."

Larry's hand tightened on the receiver. "Ellen, look in the top right-hand drawer of my desk. There should be a revolver there." There was a long, painful silence. Then Ellen's voice came again:

"Gone, too," she said. "Now, listen, Larry. The minute I found out what had happened, I called Adrian and warned him. Then I sent Bones downtown to wait around outside Adrian's office building—Adrian's working late. If Lon turns up, Bones will catch him. It was the only thing I could think of to do. You'd better come back here and wait for Bones to report. As for your Miss Warren, when she finds no one at the office she'll probably telephone you here."

Larry barged into his apartment about ten minutes later to find that Ellen had set a small table in front of the fire. A big wooden bowl of salad reposed in the centre. Ellen, coming out of the kitchen, saw his glance.

"You'll have to stay here till we get some word of Lon," she explained. "I thought you'd want to eat."

"But I'm dining with Lucia Warren!"

"There's enough for her," said Ellen. "I ordered some chops at your butcher's. Ours are cooking now."

"You ought to get married," Larry said. "You think of everything." He looked at his watch. It was after seven. "Lucia should have rung up by now if she's going to. Confound it! This is a mess."

"Bones called just before you came in," said Ellen. "Lon hasn't showed up at Adrian's. You better sit tight till Bones picks him up."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't wait till tomorrow to tell me that," Larry said. "Well, if we're going to eat, let's eat!"

Ellen slipped back to the kitchen, and returned presently with the platter of chops. She lighted the candles and they sat down.

"This is a waste of time," Larry protested. "Lucia will probably call any minute, then I'll have to eat dinner all over again." He was just reaching for the salad bowl when the phone rang.

"There!" he said. "That'll be my glamour girl." He went over and picked up the receiver. It was Lucia. Her voice seemed a little queer, but Larry put it down to pique.

"I'm sorry I missed you," he said, "but I can explain how it happened."

"Please, Larry, let me talk," said Lucia, urgently. It sounded to Larry as if she were breathing hard, as if she'd been running. "I'm in a pay station in a cigar store on Fifty-three Nassau Street. Can you remember that, Larry?"

"I know where it is," Larry said. "I feel like a heel, Lucia, with you still waiting down there."

"Larry! Please listen! Can you come down right away. I'll wait for you here." Her voice shook. "Max Adrian has been murdered!"

III

LARRY saw Lucia standing at the far end of the cigar store, near the telephone booths. Her face was dead white, and her lips were trembling.

"I thought you'd never come," she cried, unsteadily.

"Made it as quickly as I could," he said. "Now, take it easy, darling. We can't talk in here. There's a bar just opposite." He tucked her arm through his and led her across the street to Conley's Tap Room. They sat down at a little booth in the corner and Larry ordered brandy.

"Oh, Larry, it was awful!" Lucia began. "I walked into his office and—there he was, lying on the floor, a little round

hole in his forehead."

A shudder shook her whole body. "Take it easy," repeated Larry. "Wait till you've had this drink."

The waiter brought two ponies of brandy, slid them across the table.

"Drink," Larry said. Lucia lifted the glass to her lips. She swallowed with difficulty, as if her throat muscles were tightly contracted.

"Now," Larry urged her gently, "let's have it. What were you doing at Adrian's?"

"I came down to your office with the catalogue about five-thirty," she told him, finally, "but there wasn't any one there. I guess I must have waited for about half an hour and then I went somewhere near your office and had a cocktail. Then I went back to your office again, thinking you'd surely have arrived by then." A smile struggled to her lips. "I was pretty mad at being stood up!"

"I'm sorry," said Larry. "I'll explain what happened sometime."

She nodded. "I knew there must be a good reason, but I was irritated all the same, and being in a temper made me think of Adrian. From the way you'd explained things this morning I was convinced he had cheated me, and I wanted to see him and accuse him of it. So I telephoned him. He told me he had an appointment at seven o'clock, but that he'd be glad to see me at seven-thirty. So I went and had some dinner, and then I went to his office. Oh Larry!"

"Finish your brandy," he said, sternly. "Now, go ahead."

"The elevator wasn't running and I had to walk up to the third floor. His office door was unlocked, so I went into the waiting room. There wasn't any one there." She hesitated an instant. "I didn't hear any one talking in the office beyond, so I went ahead and opened the door." She stared at Larry, her eyes dilated. "There he was, lying on the floor and staring up at me, with that little round hole in his forehead."

"And no one else around?" Larry asked, sharply.

"Not a soul, Larry. Then as I stood there, I saw a gun on the edge of the desk. I—I picked it up and looked at it."

"Have on your gloves?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Then—then I thought the police ought to be notified. I walked around behind Adrian's desk to the phone. I started to dial the operator, and then I got frightened all over again, Larry, and I just ran. When I got out on the street I went into that cigar store and phoned you."

"And the police haven't been notified?"

"No, I didn't call them," Lucia said. She reached out a hand to him. "I suppose my fingerprints are on that gun and on the telephone. It might be hard to explain."

"Rather hard," said Larry.

"You see, Adrian's people—the girl and that clerk of his—know I was there yesterday and that I quarreled with him about Father's stamps. It might look—suspicious."

"Where's that catalogue you brought downtown?" Larry cut in.

"I—I must have left it on Adrian's desk."

STANDING up, Larry dropped a dollar bill on the table. "Let's go," he said. "We've got to get rid of those fingerprints of yours and recover that catalogue before the police take over. Now listen, Lucia. I'm going down there, and get rid of the evidence against you. You're going to walk up to the Brooklyn Bridge Subway station and take a train uptown. When you get home, have a good stiff drink and then try to get some rest. And if the police question you—"

"Larry!"

"Listen, darling. They're going to talk to Louderbach sooner or later. He's going to tell them that you were there yesterday, and that you had a row with Adrian. They're almost certain to question you then."

"I s-see."

"You admit quite frankly that you were there yesterday, everything about that visit just as it happened. *But you haven't seen him or been there since!* Understand? Now go home the way I told you, sit tight, and I'll call you."

He parted with her outside Conley's and walked south on Nassau Street to the building in which Adrian had his offices. At the third floor he went along the corridor to the door, opened it, and stepped in.

"Reach for the ceiling, and fast!" said

a harsh voice, in back of him.

Larry turned quickly. Standing behind the door was the bull-necked assistant of Inspector Bradley. He was covering Larry with an automatic.

"Reach!" repeated the detective, grimly. Then as Larry slowly raised his hands, the inspector himself sauntered out of Adrian's private office.

"Mercy!" he said, when he saw Larry. Then he turned to his assistant. "You can put away your cannon, Rube. Mr. Storm and I were both anticipating this meeting."

"Not me," said Larry.

"Adrian is dead," said Bradley. "Surprised?"

"Not exactly," said Larry.

"Care to have a look at him?"

"Why not?" said Larry.

Bradley gestured toward the door of the private office with the stem of his pipe, and Larry walked ahead of him into the room. There were several other men there. One of them was busily dusting furniture with a grey powder. Another had a camera set up in one corner, but he had finished taking pictures and was packing plates away in a black leather case. A third man was evidently a medical examiner.

Adrian's body lay on the rug in the private office, just as Lucia had described it, the little eyes staring up at the ceiling. Larry's eyes strayed to the desk. Neither gun nor catalogue was there.

"Picture of a man stricken with grief as he views the body of a dear friend," said Bradley softly, then turned to three other men in the room. "Through, boys?" A photographer and the fingerprint man nodded. "Okay, then, Doc. You can take little Maxie down to the chopping block and go to work on him. Let's get him out of here so we can have a little elbow room."

Presently two white-coated men came in, lifted Adrian's body onto a stretcher, and carried it out. The fingerprint man, the photographer, and the doctor followed them. Bradley, watching them go, said casually to Larry: "By the by, Mr. Storm, have we you to thank for calling us to this little tea party?"

"You mean you don't know who notified you about the murder?" said Larry.

"Our informant was terribly shy. He wouldn't give his name. Just said he thought we'd be interested to know that Adrian was lying dead in his office, and hung up!"

"Maybe it was the murderer himself," Larry kept his voice quite steady. "The fingerprints on the gun should help."

"What gun?" Bradley asked.

Larry opened his mouth and then closed it with a snap. "Why—I assumed you had the gun," he said.

"Is it your experience, Mr. Storm, that murderers leave their guns behind them with a convenient set of fingerprints for our benefit? By the way, why are you here?"

"I came to see Adrian on stamp business," said Larry.

THE police inspector's manner was casual as he asked his next question. "Did you have an appointment with Adrian tonight?"

"No," Larry said, promptly. "I just took a chance that he'd be here."

"And he was," said Bradley mournfully. "Tell me about him."

"A rat," said Larry. "A first-class unvarnished rat. He cheated his clients out of thousands of dollars each year. Maybe somebody caught him at it."

"Your friend who got kicked around this afternoon, for example? By the way, where is he now?"

"Home, I suppose. But Lon Nicholas was not the only one who didn't like Max." Larry shrugged.

"Oh, definitely not," said Bradley. He began to saunter around the room, and finally he came to a halt in front of Adrian's safe of which the big, outer door was standing open.

"Take a look at this," said Bradley, pointing to a heavily loaded key ring. One of the keys was inserted in the lock of the inner door. A gold chain dangled from the ring.

"Those are Adrian's keys," the inspector said. "One of the belt loops on his pants was ripped loose. It looks as though somebody took the keys out of his pocket after he was dead, couldn't unsnap the chain, and tore it free. Fingers might be a little clumsy just after a killing. Suggest anything to you?"

"Robbery, of course."

"But there's nothing but books in there," said Bradley. He swung open the safe door

"Books containing thousands of dollars' worth of stamps," said Larry. His eyes narrowed. "And there are some missing!"

"How do you know?" Bradley asked.

"I've seen the inside of this safe before."

The inspector sighed. "You have an answer for everything, haven't you, Mr. Storm?" He walked to the door of the Inspection Room. "Could these be the missing books?" he asked.

The lights were burning brightly in the buyer's sanctum. On a little wheel-table beside a big armchair was a pile of leather-bound stock books. The top one lay open. Larry looked down at the open book, and his lips pursed in a low whistle.

"This is *stuff!*" he said. Bradley peered over his shoulder. "British Guiana issues," Larry explained, and reaching down with skilled fingers took one of the stamps out of its slot. "This is an Eighteen-Fifty-Six Number Sixteen," he said. "Your collector will pay six thousand for this one, Inspector. Incidentally, the one-cent stamp of this same issue—it's magenta in color—is the most valuable in the world. There's only one known to be in existence. It was offered for sale the other day for thirty-seven thousand five hundred."

"Mercy!" said Bradley. He was looking at the stamp Larry still held between his fingers. "Writing on the back of it, too," he observed. "What's it mean? Looks like the letters, 'ORHH'."

Larry's voice was unnaturally taut. "That's what they call a broker's code, Inspector. We usually have a code—some ten-letter word with all the letters different. The letters represent the nine digits and the zero. We sometimes pencil in the amount we have to get for a stamp to make a profit. Thus, when we're talking to a customer we know just how much we have to ask by looking on the back."

"I see," said Bradley, vaguely. "What was Adrian's code word?"

Larry chuckled. "He wouldn't tell his own mother that! Neither would I. Even his employees won't be able to tell you." He replaced the Number 16 in the stock book. "Now that you've had the benefit of my knowledge about Max and the stamp business in general," he said to Bradley, "is there any reason why I shouldn't go along home, Inspector?"

Bradley's eyebrows went up. "You don't expect me to turn loose a perfectly good suspect, do you, Mr. Storm?"

"*Am* I a suspect, Inspector?"

"Mercy, yes!" said Bradley, as Rube's voice came to them from the outer office.

"Hey, Red! We've got another caller."

"Bring him in," said Bradley, cheerfully.

AT the sight of Rube's prisoner Larry groaned audibly.

"Know the lady, Storm?" Bradley asked.

"Sure, I know her!" Larry said, angrily. "She's my secretary, Ellen Dixon!"

"Okay, Rube," said Bradley, his eyes twinkling. "Go back to your post and see if we catch anything more in your net." Then as Rube went away, he said to Ellen: "You'd better come in and make yourself comfortable, Miss Dixon."

"Adrian's been murdered, Ellen," Larry said. "Shot. Some one—Inspector Bradley doesn't know who—notified the police. At the moment I seem to be under suspicion."

"When was he killed?" Ellen asked, sitting down in one of the chairs near Adrian's desk.

"Medical evidence is so vague," said Bradley.

"I don't know whether this provides Mr. Storm with an alibi or not," Ellen said, "but I'll give it to you for what it's worth. He got back to his apartment at about seven this evening. I was there. I had supper waiting for him. At about a quarter to eight he went downtown to see Mr. Adrian while I went to the office to get some information from the files. I was to join him here."

The inspector sighed. "Maybe you're telling the truth," he said, "in part. And I did want to cling to Mr. Storm as my suspect for a while. Oh, well—" He began to make another aimless tour of the room. Presently he stepped through the door into the outer office.

"You would walk right into this," Larry said, in a sharp whisper.

"You, too," Ellen said. She glanced toward the door. "Larry, about Bones—"

Larry interrupted her. "The walls have ears," he said. "This guy is smart.

Had me on thin ice a couple of times."

Bradley came through the door again. "Ever see a bottle with a tree in it before?" he asked, holding up a narrow-necked object. Inside was what looked like a small branch, heavily coated with crystallized sugar.

"It's an Italian liqueur called *Fiore di Alpa*," said Larry.

"Any good?" Bradley asked.

"Too sweet for my taste," said Larry.

The inspector shook his head. "You don't react," he said. "This thing was just thrown in to make it tough. I found it on the receptionist's desk. See that stain on the bottom? It's blood, and there are several hairs sticking to it. And out there in the waiting room, near the desk, is a little pool of blood on the floor. Somebody was slugged with this bottle, fell down on the floor, and bled." He glanced at Ellen and Larry, but their faces were blank. "Now no one slugged Adrian, and apparently no one slugged either of you, though I haven't looked under Miss Dixon's hat!"

"You may," said Ellen, but at that moment Rube called out from the other room. "Hey, Red! Here's Mike with that clerk you sent for."

Mr. Louderbach, his eyes looking enormous behind the thick lenses of his spectacles, came in.

When he saw Larry, he raised a shaking hand.

"So it was you!" he said.

Mr. Louderbach escorted to a chair, began to give. He told of his horror when the plain-clothes man had arrived at his room with news of Mr. Adrian's death. He was not surprised to find that Mr. Storm had killed Mr. Adrian. Theirs had not been an "amicable relationship." Only that afternoon Mr. Storm had threatened Mr. Adrian after accusing Mr. Adrian of dishonesty in the auctioning of a collection belonging to a certain Miss Warren. The truth of the matter was that Mr. Storm himself had cheated Miss Warren and was endeavoring to place the blame on Mr. Adrian. Then there was that matter of Mr. Storm's friend, Mr. Nicholas.

"How do you like Mr. Nicholas as a potential murderer?" Bradley invited.

"I doubt whether he would have had the courage to return so soon," said Louderbach. "He's an incompetent hysteric. Besides, he must have known Mr. Adrian would be prepared for him."

"And Miss Warren. Did she think Mr. Adrian had cheated her?"

"I regret to say that she did," said Louderbach.

THE inspector produced a small printed leaflet from his pocket. "Ever see this?" he asked.

Louderbach adjusted his spectacles. "That is the catalogue of the Warren collection that was used at the auction," he said.

"I see a lot of figures penciled in," said Bradley. "I suppose those are the prices the stamps brought at the sale. Was this, by any chance, Mr. Adrian's property?"

Louderbach shook his head vigorously.

"That's Miss Warren's copy," he said. "I saw it when she came here yesterday. She must have left it, and Mr. Adrian and Mr. Storm were probably quarreling over it."

"I never saw that catalogue before in my life," said Larry.

[*Turn page*]

Bradley sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that," he muttered. He turned to Louderbach. "Mr. Adrian had other quarrels besides the one with Mr. Storm, didn't he?"

"Mr. Adrian was a shrewd business man," said Louderbach.

"He must have been," said Bradley. "Who did he quarrel with?"

"I shouldn't care to say."

"How about Howard Stevens?" Larry cut in.

Mr. Louderbach squirmed. "A regrettable incident," he admitted, and Larry laughed. He explained about Stevens to the inspector. "However, Stevens hasn't been here tonight," he added.

"How do you know?" Bradley asked, sharply.

"Because there's no sign of any one's having been sick around the place." Larry grinned and turned sharply back to Louderbach. "How about Luckman?" he demanded.

Louderbach squirmed more than ever. "You really can't blame Mr. Adrian for that. Any dealer would have done the same thing."

"Tell the inspector about it," said Larry.

"Well," Louderbach said, "Mr. Luckman had a standing order with Mr. Adrian for a Newfoundland Number Ten. Mr. Luckman had agreed to go as high as twenty-five hundred dollars for it if Mr. Adrian should ever discover one. Mr. Adrian knew that was all Mr. Luckman could afford to pay."

"That's about five hundred dollars more than the actual value of the stamp," Larry put in.

Mr. Louderbach moistened his lips. "That's true," he agreed. "Well, Mr. Adrian obtained the stamp. He was about to notify Mr. Luckman when he received another offer for it, an offer of thirty-five hundred! Naturally Mr. Adrian sold it to the higher bidder."

"Mr. Luckman didn't like that?" asked Bradley.

"He was considerably vexed," admitted Louderbach.

"And who made such a cock-eyed offer?" Larry asked.

Mr. Louderbach squared his shoulders. "Mr. Jasper Hale!" he said.

Larry stared, an expression of amazement on his face. "Will some one let me in on this?" Bradley asked.

"Hale is probably the biggest collector in New York," Larry explained. "And one of the shrewdest. He doesn't make cock-eyed offers. And doesn't collect Newfoundlands!" Larry almost shouted.

"The offer was made and the money paid by Mr. Hale's secretary, Paul Gregory," said Louderbach, primly. "If you doubt my word, you can check with him. Furthermore, I have just remembered that Mr. Adrian had an appointment with Mr. Gregory tonight, at seven o'clock. Mr. Gregory may have been the last person to see Mr. Adrian alive!"

Nobody spoke for a minute. Then Bradley closed his eyes. "I've got a headache," he said, surprisingly. "I'm going to take a couple of aspirin and sleep on this. Go home, all of you, but don't try leaving town. I'll want to see you in the morning."

IV

ONCE she and Larry were in a cab together, Ellen's composure deserted her. "Oh, Larry, I'm terribly frightened about Bones. After you left I tried to find him. The man at the saloon where he was supposed to be hasn't seen him or Lon Nicholas since he telephoned me about six-thirty. That's why I came to Adrian's."

"Bones can take care of himself."

But Ellen wasn't satisfied. "Larry, you know Lon is a little cracked. If he did it, and Bones caught him at it—well, he might try to keep Bones quiet, mightn't he?"

Larry looked at her. "Lon was right, Ellen," he said gravely. "Adrian was Oscar Rivero."

"Larry! You mean you have proof?"

He nodded. "Some one had taken some of the stock books out of Adrian's safe and piled them on the table in the Inspection Room. The top book was open and I took a look. There was a British Guiana Number Sixteen, with code letters on the back. Bradley thinks it's Adrian's code; but, Ellen, it was Lon's! His code word was 'Dictograph.' The letters ORHH were on that stamp. Fifty-seven hundred dollars. I remember distinctly that was one of the stolen items and that Lon had priced it at fifty-seven hundred dollars. There's no doubt about it."

"Then it *must* have been Lon, Larry. And Bones! Do you think he'd—do you

think he'd hurt Bones?"

Larry shook his head. "I don't think Lon would hurt Bones, but if Bones has something on him, Lon might hang onto the kid till he had gotten clean away. You'd better go back to the apartment and wait there. Bones *might* communicate! Meanwhile, I've got to see Lucia."

"Of course," said Ellen, dryly. "Why think of Bones? After all, he has so little sex."

"Ellen! Holy jumping — Driver, stop!" Larry yanked open the door as the taxi pulled up to the curb. "Take this *lady*," he told the driver, "to Seven Gramercy Park East!"

Larry hailed another taxi and drove to Lucia's apartment in the East Sixties. "Is everything all right, Larry?" she asked as she opened the door for him.

"Everything is terrible!" he said. "The cops were there when I arrived! They've got your fingerprints all right, but Lucia, there wasn't any gun." Briefly he told her what had happened at Adrian's office.

"Maybe your Mr. Bradley did find the gun and was just trying to get you to commit yourself," Lucia suggested. "Will he come here to see me?"

"Sooner or later," said Larry, "and you've got to have a pat story for him. He knows about your first visit to Adrian from Louderbach, but fortunately Louderbach assumed you left the catalogue there at that time. Your story has to be that you did, and that you haven't seen Adrian since."

"But, Larry, if—" She was interrupted by the doorbell.

"I'll get it," Larry said. It was Inspector Bradley.

"How did you know I was here?" Larry demanded.

Bradley grinned. "The plain truth is, Storm, I followed you. I thought if I hung onto your coat tails, I might get taken interesting places." He bowed to Lucia. "I am Inspector Bradley, Miss Warren," he explained. "This doesn't look like the kind of a room where a man ought to smoke a pipe, but I'd be a lot happier if you wouldn't object."

"Please do," Lucia said.

Bradley filled his pipe, strolled over to the fireplace, struck a match on one of the inside bricks, and held it to the bowl. "I wish this visit weren't professional," he sighed. "A charming room, a fire, a well-seasoned pipe . . ."

"You're forgetting a good book," said Larry.

"As a matter of fact, I wasn't," said Bradley. "I was just about to say that I have a book here. A catalogue—a catalogue belonging to you, Miss Warren."

"She left that catalogue at Adrian's yesterday," Larry said. "She was just telling me about it. And see here, Bradley, it's no use grilling Miss Warren. Adrian's death is a bad break for her. Adrian had cheated her out of about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Alive, there was a chance of getting restitution. Dead, she's out of luck. She's the last person in the world to have wanted anything to happen to Max."

"I see," Bradley murmured.

HE reached into his pocket and took out a small, gold compact. "Ever see this before?" he asked Lucia.

"No," said Lucia. "I never saw it before."

"I didn't think you had," Bradley said, sadly, and just then the telephone rang.

Lucia answered it. "For you," she said to Larry.

Larry looked stiff and uncomfortable as he spoke into the mouthpiece. "Hello."

"I hate to break up a tete-a-tete," said Ellen's calm voice, "but I thought you'd like to know that Lon Nicholas is here! He was asleep outside your apartment door when I got back—boiled to the ears."

"Is that so!" Larry's voice was casual.

"Larry, what's the matter with you? Is there some one there besides Lucia?"

"Yes."

"Bradley?"

"Yes."

"Has he arrested Lucia?"

"Don't be a fool!"

"About Lon. I got some black coffee down him. He swears he hasn't been anywhere near Adrian, and he swears he hasn't seen anything of Bones since he locked him in the bathroom. Something's happened to Bones, Larry. Will you please come home soon?"

"Yes, of course," said Larry. "Be seeing you."

He hung up the receiver. Bradley sighed. "I don't suppose either one of you would like to break down and talk?"

"I told you all I knew down at Adrian's," snapped Larry. "Miss Warren doesn't know anything at all about it."

"I was afraid of that," sighed Bradley, and went over to the chair where he'd left his coat. "I'm on my way to see Paul Gregory," he said. "I'd appreciate it if you'd come along, Storm. You might help me think up some bright questions to ask him about stamps."

Jasper Hale's house was on Fifth Avenue near 93rd Street. "I want to see Mr. Gregory," said Bradley.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible, sir," replied the butler. "Mr. Gregory has retired for the night."

Bradley produced a police badge. "Let's start over again," he said. "I want to see Mr. Gregory."

"Come in, sir," said the butler, his eyes popping.

Bradley and Storm walked into a great entrance hall.

"If you'll wait here a moment, gentlemen, I'll rouse Mr. Gregory," said the butler. He had just started for the stairway when a door on the far side of the hall opened. A tall, gaunt figure of a man appeared.

"What the devil is all this disturbance, Halliday?" he demanded, then turned to the intruders. "I'm Jasper Hale," he snapped. "What's the meaning of this?"

Bradley eyed him mildly. "I'm Inspector Bradley of the Homicide Division," he said. "This is Mr. Lawrence Storm."

"Homicide!" Hale exploded and turned on Larry. "Storm! I know you," he said. "Steered clear of you for years. Is this some trick?"

"It's no trick," Bradley said. "A man named Max Adrian has been murdered. Your Mr. Gregory had an appointment with him just a short time before he was shot. I want to ask him about it."

Hale said scornfully, "Adrian! Gregory! That's idiotic! Gregory wouldn't put his foot inside that crook's office." He turned as the butler, followed by Paul Gregory, returned. "Gregory!" Jasper Hale said, his voice harsh. "This is a police inspector. He is under the mistaken impression that you had an appointment with Adrian tonight. And Adrian's been murdered. Kindly put them straight about it." His pale eyes narrowed. "What the devil have you done to your head?"

ACROSS the back of Gregory's skull was a large patch of adhesive tape. "I—I bumped it on the c-corner of m-my b-bureau," he stammered.

Bradley looked at Larry. "Mercy," he said, "what a coincidence!"

"Coincidence?" exclaimed Jasper Hale. "What's a coincidence?"

"The bottle with the tree in it," said the inspector absently. "Sorry, I was just thinking out loud." He looked up. "Mr. Hale," he said, "I have a feeling this interview can't be completed as quickly as I had hoped. Do you suppose there is some place we might sit down?

"My study," he snorted and led the way down the hall. Hale sat down in a highbacked wooden armchair. He waved at other chairs.

"Well, get on with it!" he said impatiently.

Bradley filled his pipe. "Now, Mr. Gregory," he said, when he got it going. "Adrian's secretary says that you had made an appointment with Adrian for seven o'clock tonight. You're going to say you didn't have an appointment, or that, if you did, you didn't keep it. Then I'll have to have a doctor examine that injury to your head, and I'll have to compare some of your hair with the hair we found sticking to the bottle with which you were struck. It'll save time if you just tell me what really happened tonight."

"Were you at Adrian's office, Gregory?" Jasper Hale demanded. Very slowly the secretary nodded. "What the devil for?"

"Perhaps I can explain that, Mr. Hale," Larry said. "Under the circumstances, Gregory, there doesn't seem—"

"No! No!" Gregory cut in. "I'll explain!—I was d-doing a little collecting of my own, on the s-side. I had had some p-private dealings with Mr. Adrian. Also, I commissioned Mr. Storm to find a stamp for me—a stamp for my own collection," he added hastily.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Jasper Hale. "Were all your private dealings with brokers who weren't on my personal list, Gregory?"

Gregory nodded. "It seemed better," he said.

"About tonight," Bradley prompted the secretary. "Did you go to see Adrian?"

"Yes."

"At what time?"

"I got there early," Gregory said. "At about a quarter to seven. Adrian was not engaged, so I saw him right away. I wanted him to get a certain stamp for me. He said he would. Then I—" He floundered.

"Now we're coming to the bottle," said Bradley. "Well?"

"D-don't know what happened then!" Gregory stammered. "I—I walked out of the private office into the waiting room. Something struck me over the head. Everything went b-black. Then, when I c-came to I was lying on the f-floor. Somehow I got up to my feet. First I w-wanted to run, b-but, I felt sick and I was afraid I couldn't get down to the street. Then I decided to see Adrian and find out what had happened." He moistened his lips. "I opened the door to the private office. There he was!"

"Dead?" Bradley asked.

"He was lying on the floor beside his desk. I—got out of there as quickly as I could."

Bradley tapped the stem of his pipe against his teeth. "I don't suppose you know what time it was when you finally left the office?"

"When I got d-down to the street," Gregory said, "I called a cab. In the cab I l-looked at my watch. It was just twenty-five minutes past seven."

Bradley nodded. "But before you got into the cab you went into the drug store on the corner, didn't you? You telephoned to police headquarters."

Gregory nodded, slowly. "Yes, I called the police," he said. "I—I thought they should be told. B-but I didn't give my name because I didn't want any one to know I'd been there."

JASPER HALE snorted. "The whole extraordinary business serves you right, Gregory. It's what you get for dealing with a man like Adrian. You know I wouldn't touch a thing that had passed through his hands."

"But you have done just that!" Larry said sharply. "You bought a Newfoundland Number Ten from Adrian and paid a cock-eyed price for it! How about it! How about that, Mr. Hale?"

"I never bought a stamp from Adrian in my life. It's true I bought a Number Ten, but I—" He stopped abruptly. "Gregory!"

Gregory seemed to shrivel in his clothes. "Mr. Hale d-didn't know that stamp came from Adrian, gentlemen," he said. "I—I had been commissioned by Mr. Hale to get it. Then one day when I was seeing Adrian on my own business, I mentioned the Newfoundland Number Ten. He had one, so—so I bought it. I d-dn't tell Mr. Hale where it came from because I knew he would-n't be p-pleased."

"That still doesn't account for your willingness to pay thirty-five hundred dollars for a stamp that is listed at two thousand," Larry said to Hale. "Particularly since you don't collect Newfoundlands. How about it?"

Hale smiled, an acid smile. "I give you credit, at least, for asking an intelligent question, though it's none of your business. However, I think you'll understand. A collector friend of mine has a stamp I want badly, one of the Eighteen Sixty-One of Good Hope Triangular—the Number Eleven, wood block."

"Who's your friend?" Bradley asked.

"My dear Inspector," said Hale, dryly, "you don't think I'd give out his name, and have Storm and every other dealer in town camping on his trail! The point is, this gentleman has a stamp I want. I knew he wanted that Newfoundland Number Ten. If I could get one quickly he might be willing to make a trade. Money was no object. That was why I paid a sucker price for the Newfoundland."

"And have you made the trade?" Larry asked.

"That is my affair," Hale said, stiffly.

The inspector watched the smoke curl up from the bowl of his pipe. Then he got up. "Well, that seems to be that," he said. "And very interesting, too." He looked down at Gregory. "Of course you'll keep yourself available, Mr. Gregory. I wouldn't like to have to arrest you as a material witness. Don't decide on any trips."

"He'll be here," Hale said. "I'll see to it."

On the street Larry paused beside the inspector's car. "I'm going home now," he said. "If you're planning to follow me again, it might be simpler to take me there."

Bradley smiled. "You look tired enough to do a little sleeping," he said. "I can see you first thing in the morning?"

"I'll be at my office," Larry said. "You believed Gregory's story?"

Bradley shrugged. "It fits the facts. Didn't you?"

V

UPON reaching the foyer of his apartment Larry dropped his coat and hat on the wooden bench. "Where's Lon?" he asked.

"Asleep in the guest room," Ellen said. "He's in bad shape, Larry. You won't get anything out of him."

"Got to," he said. "No word from Bones?"

Ellen shook her head. "What happened, Larry?" she asked.

He told her now, in detail.

"It's getting clearer," he said, when he had described the interview at Hale's house. "Gregory arrives at quarter of seven and sees Adrian. While he's there the murderer comes into the waiting room. He hears Adrian talking to Gregory. He waits there behind the door. When Gregory comes out, he clouts him over the head with the *Fiore di Alpa* bottle. Then he goes in to see Adrian and shoots him, in cold blood. He yanks the keys from Adrian's pocket, puts his gun down on the desk, and goes over to the safe and opens it. He takes out some of the stock books and carries them into the Inspection Room, where the light is better." He paused.

"Enter Miss Warren," said Ellen, dryly, "or so she says."

Larry gave her a sharp look. "Enter Lucia," he agreed. "The murderer sees her pick up the gun and put it down again, sees her go to the phone and then bolt. He realizes he's got to get out before she notifies the police, so he makes tracks, taking the gun with him. That's how it must have happened."

"Did Miss Warren step over Gregory's body when she came in? Or didn't she notice him, lying on the floor?"

"Stop harping on Lucia!" said Larry. "Gregory came to, went downstairs and phoned the police, and was in a cab by twenty-five minutes past seven. Lucia's appointment wasn't until seven-thirty."

"If the murderer was still there when Miss Warren arrived," said Ellen, "he must have been poring over those stamps for a good half hour. A cool customer, Larry."

"Or too drunk to use his head!" Larry said. He passed a hand across his eyes. "Don't you see it's just the kind of thing Lon would do. He'd take out the stock books and find his own stamps in them. He'd stay with them, wouldn't want to leave them. But he wouldn't take them, because he would be shrewd enough to realize that that would point directly to him."

"And Bones?" Ellen asked.

"Maybe he caught Lon at it. Or maybe he saw Lon coming out of the building. Drunk or not, I'm going to talk to Lon."

Lon Nicholas lay on the bed in Larry's guest room. Larry stood over him for a minute, his face stern. Then he reached down and shook Lon by the shoulder. He said, sharply, "Snap out of it, Lon!"

Lon opened bloodshot, heavy lidded eyes. "Oh, it's you, Larry," he muttered and shut his eyes again.

"Lon, I've got to talk to you!" Larry took him by both shoulders and jerked him to a sitting posture.

Ellen came into the room with a cup of coffee. Between them they forced Lon to drink. "Where did you go when you left here this afternoon?" Larry demanded.

"Anywhere—everywhere. How do I know?"

"Listen, half-baked!" Larry shook him. "Adrian's been murdered!"

Lon stared at him for an instant, then began to shake with laughter. "Adrian murdered! That's wonderful. That's a joke!"

"He had your stamps, Lon," Larry said, steadily. "I saw them."

Lon stopped laughing. "My stamps!" he whispered almost soberly. "He had them?"

"Yes, and you saw them yourself and you shot him."

"No! No, Larry!"

"Where have you been since five o'clock this afternoon? If you didn't kill him, what have you been up to?"

LON raised his hands to his face. "I don't know, Larry. I left here—went somewhere for a drink."

"You went to Adrian's," Larry said, harshly. "You slugged one of his customers with a liquor bottle and then you went in and shot him. Where's the gun you took out of my desk when you left?"

"Gun?"

"Lon, this is serious! Didn't you go to Adrian's when you left here?"

"Please, please! I can't remember!"

"What have you done to Bones? Where is he?"

"I don't know, Larry. I left him here."

"You killed Adrian," Larry persisted, "and Bones caught you at it. What did you do to Bones, Lon? If you've hurt him, I'll break your neck!"

"Larry!" Lon almost shouted. "I can't remember anything. But I'd remember killing Adrian, wouldn't I? I *wanted* to kill him! And I didn't see Bones. I'd remember that too, wouldn't I? Good kid. I wouldn't *hurt* him would I?"

Larry gave him a little push back onto the pillow. "Go to sleep," he said, dully, then turned and walked out of the room. "Maybe Lon *is* innocent," he said to Ellen. "But I still can't believe he'd hurt Bones."

"Then Bones's absence is even more serious than if Lon had done something with him!" Ellen said. "You're going to tell the police about Bones, of course?"

"Listen, Ellen, if Bones caught the murderer red-handed and the murderer killed him, it isn't going to help Bones to notify the police, and it might put Lon or Lucia into a spot where they'd be railroaded fo a crime they didn't commit. If the murderer didn't kill Bones, but is just holding him, the minute we send out a general alarm the killer may get cold feet and finish him off."

"Larry, I can't bear it!" Ellen cried.

"Take it easy," said Larry. "There's a third possibility. Bones may have seen the murderer, but not been seen himself. The murderer may have started to make a getaway, and Bones may have followed. We may hear from him any time."

"If I could only believe that!" Ellen cried.

"We'll do a little sleuthing on our own in the morning," Larry said. "There's Mickey Hogan, Bones's pal. He knows that Nassau Street neighborhood like a book. He may be able to get on Bones's trail somehow." He reached out and took her hand in his. "Ellen, I want to find Bones just as badly as you do. But I'm sure this is the right line to take."

Ellen drew a deep breath, and then withdrew her hand from his. "All right, Teacher, maybe it makes sense," she said. "Now you'd better go to bed."

When Larry Storm arrived at 64½ Nassau Street the next morning, Ellen and Bones's customer, Mickey Hogan, were already there. "I haven't told him anything yet," said Ellen.

"Come in here, Mickey, and sit down by my desk," Larry invited. "You and Bones are pretty thick, aren't you?"

Mickey snorted. "That double-crossin' chiseler."

"Bones is in trouble."

"Serves him right," said Mickey. "I suppose he tried to cheat a big customer."

Ellen cut in. "This is serious, Mickey," she said. "Bones may be dead, or badly hurt!"

Mickey stared at her, his mouth open.

"Mickey," Larry said gravely: "I'm going to tell you some things that I don't want passed on to any one, particularly the police. You've read in the morning papers, I take it, that a stamp dealer named Max Adrian was murdered last night. Well, a friend of mine didn't like this man. He was drunk yesterday, he was carrying a gun, and he was threatening to kill Adrian. I sent Bones to stay with him, to make sure he didn't get into trouble. This friend of mine gave Bones the slip. Bones talked to Ellen on the phone last night about six-thirty, and since then we haven't seen or heard from him."

MICKEY'S hands tightened upon the arms of his chair.

"You mean this friend of yours done somethin' to Bones?" the boy asked.

"I'm pretty sure he didn't," said Larry. "But Bones was hanging around Adrian's office, Mickey, and I think he must have seen the murderer go in and come out."

"Then you think—"

"I think the murderer may have done something to keep Bones from talking!"

"But, Mr. Storm, what can I do?"

"You know this part of town inside out," Larry told the boy. "What I want you to do is ask questions—kids who might know Bones, shopkeepers, bootblacks. Find out if any one saw him after six-thirty, what he was doing, where he was going."

Mickey jumped to his feet. "You bet, Mr. Storm. The minute I find out anythin' I'll let you know." He darted out of Larry's office and ran through the outer room. They heard the hinged section of the counter slam against the wall and then a querulous voice.

"Why don't you look where you're going, you young rapscallion?"

Ellen raised her eyes to heaven. "Mr. Julius!"

He appeared in the doorway, his black metal ear trumpet protruding from a pocket of his coat. He gave Larry a look of malicious satisfaction.

"Well, I see they haven't arrested you yet!"

Larry looked at Ellen. "The man can read," he said.

Mr. Julius seemed to have no difficulty hearing that remark. "I can read all right," he said, testily. "And when I heard you'd identified the body, I wondered if you'd had the honesty to say to yourself, 'There, but for the grace of God, lies Lawrence Storm'!"

"Mr. Julius," said Larry, wearily, "things are a little too tough for me to think up any bright comebacks this morning."

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. He sat down in the chair opposite Larry. "Tell me about it," he said.

"There isn't anything to tell," said Larry. "Somebody shot Adrian. I don't know who did it and neither do the police. I suppose somebody will burn for it sooner or later."

"A pity," grumbled Mr. Julius. "Community better off! But come, Storm. I want details. He was killed on account of stamps, of course. Who had he cheated?"

"About every collector in New York," said Larry.

"Not me," shrilled Mr. Julius. "No one's ever cheated me. But I know every collector, every dealer, in the stamp world. One of 'em killed him. You can bank on that. Maybe I can help."

Larry's eyes narrowed. "I don't know why," he said, "but I'm going to tell you about it. Everything."

And he did. When he finished Mr. Julius delivered himself of an extra large snort.

"Commendable—very commendable, your attitude, Storm. Greater love hath no man than that he give the life of his office-boy for a friend!"

"Then you think—"

"I think we've got to find Bones!" snapped Mr. Julius. "Action, that's what we want!"

"But to find Bones we have to find the murderer, it seems."

"Nonsense! When you find Bones, you'll *have* the murderer!"

"And how do we go about it?" Larry asked.

"Great Scott, when I was your age I could *think!*" shouted Mr. Julius. "Some one interested in stamps killed Adrian. I can think of forty people offhand besides the ones you've mentioned. Eliminate some because they have no spunk. Investigate the rest—find Bones before we get through."

"You mean make a house-to-house canvass?" Larry laughed.

"Why *not?*" thundered Mr. Julius, and reached for his hat. "I shall be a one-man search party," he announced. "No one suspects me. I'm a collector, an eccentric, an old fool. Ha!"

Then his old voice softened. "Know how you feel, Storm. Fond of the boy myself. We'll find him."

LARRY and Ellen walked into the outer office with him. Just as they were approaching the counter the main door opened and a familiar figure sauntered in, pipe between his teeth.

"Come in, Bradley," Larry said. "Mr. Julius, this is Inspector Bradley, who's in charge of the Adrian case."

Out came the ear trumpet. "*Who?*" shouted Mr. Julius. "For heaven's sake, speak up!"

"Inspector Bradley, in charge of the Adrian case!" Larry bellowed.

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. "Spending the taxpayers' money to hang a man for doing a public service! Police! Phoocy!" Mr. Julius drew himself to his full height and stalked past Bradley to the door. As usual, he slammed it fiercely as he went out.

The Inspector had a purpose behind his call, but it was some time before he got around to telling what it was.

"Too bad you haven't any more influence with this employer of yours," he said casually to Ellen.

"What do you want him to do?" Ellen asked.

"I want him to stop playing cops and robbers," said Bradley, plaintively, "and be useful."

"The slogan of Lawrence Storm, Inc. is 'Service,' Inspector," said Larry. "Our inexhaustible knowledge of stamps is at your disposal."

"I suppose that's all I can hope for," muttered Bradley. "Well, here goes. I had your friend Mr. Louderbach downtown early this morning. He's made a hasty examination of those stock books of Adrian's and he's prettty certain nothing important is missing. However, he said they had no inventory of their less valuable stamps, that there was no way of telling whether any of the cheaper items had been stolen or not. Isn't that a pretty sloppy way of doing business?"

"Not at all," Larry told him, "and I'll explain why. In order to catalogue a stamp it has to be handled, appraised —its condition, its color, its defects, whether or not it's cancelled, a dozen different details. Now it takes just as much time to examine and catalogue a cheap stamp as it does one worth thousands. It's overhead again, Inspector. If we took inventory of cheap stamps and catalogued them, we'd have to charge more for them than they're worth, or tack the expense onto the more expensive items. Neither of those systems would please the customers." Larry grinned. "Any more information, Inspector?"

"Not information, but help," Bradley said. "As a matter of routine I'm questioning every one whose name has been brought into the case so far. I tried to reach the two gentlemen you were talking about last night, Ezra Luckman and Howard Stevens. I couldn't find either of them at home. But I learned that there is an exhibition going on at the Collectors' Club, starting this morning, and I thought we might find them there. If you'd introduce me, they might talk without feeling it was an inquisition."

Larry hesitated a moment, then slipped down off the desk where he'd been sitting. "Why not?" he said.

The Collectors' Club was already crowded with stamp fanciers when Larry and Bradley arrived. Larry, looking around, spotted Ezra Luckman, his hawklike profile bent over a glass case. Larry took Bradley's arm and guided him across the room. As they approached, Luckman looked up.

He chuckled, "If it isn't Mr. Storm! Our conversation of yesterday seems to have been almost prophetic, eh? Adrian got his come-uppance. Well, the world will be a better place to live in." He turned to a thin, brown-haired man who was standing beside him. "This, by the way, is Stevens, Storm. You—er—missed meeting him yesterday."

Larry introduced the inspector, who cleared his throat. "I wonder if I could ask you gentlemen to give me just a minute or two of your time? We're trying to find out all we can about Adrian, and I know that you both had dealings with him."

"Let's go into the Smoke Room and talk over a drink," suggested Larry.

STEVENS moistened his lips. "I—I don't feel very well," he said. "If —if you'll excuse me, I'll join you the moment I can." He moved away in the direction of the washroom.

Luckman laughed. "I'm afraid you've started him off on another bad day, Inspector. But I guess I can tell you all he knows about Adrian." They went through into the Smoke Room. "Well, Inspector, let's hear the gory details," he said.

"There isn't much to tell beyond what you've already read in the papers," Bradley said. "The police always have a nasty job in a case like this. We have to go painstakingly through the list of people who might have had a motive, no matter how remote, and eliminate them."

"And I'm a suspect?" Luckman's eyes narrowed.

Bradley made a deprecating gesture. "You had recently had an unpleasant experience with Adrian," he said.

Luckman nodded. "Yes, I did," he admitted. "I collect Newfoundlands, Inspector. I needed just one stamp to bring that collection up to date. I had placed a standing order with Adrian, in case he got hold of it. Well, he got one, and then sold it without giving me a chance to raise my bid."

"All of which wouldn't make you love Adrian," said Bradley.

"Quite right, Inspector." Luckman laughed. "But there was only one satisfactory way to hurt Max. Through his pocketbook. I'll admit I was planning a little revenge but my idea was that sometime I'd sucker him into buying a cripple for a fancy price."

"Then you didn't kill him?"

"No, Inspector, I didn't."

"About Stevens?" Bradley said. "I suppose he'll be able to account for his time last night?"

"The washroom attendant should be able to alibi him." Luckman emitted a chuckle.

"I suppose you have an alibi, too, Mr. Luckman?" said Bradley.

"Yes, I have," said Luckman, promptly. "I went to an early movie at the Radio City Music Hall, came back here to the Club at about ten minutes past ten, had a snack, and then went home."

It was at that moment that a boy came through the Smoke Room paging the Inspector.

"Telephone for you, sir. You can take it right over there in the booth."

Bradley left the other two for a moment. When he came back to the table, he said:

"I'm much obliged for your help, Mr. Luckman. Shall we be moving, Storm?"

They went out of the Club and onto the street. Bradley hailed a taxi. "That was my invaluable assistant, Rube Snyder," he said.

"Something turned up?" Larry asked.

"Mercy, yes," muttered Bradley. "He's at Adrian's office. He says he's solved the case!"

VI

RUBE SNYDER was sitting in an armchair in the waiting room when Larry and the inspector arrived.

"Come this way," he said and to their surprise led them along the corridor outside to the door of the adjoining office. "It was rented about a week ago by a bird named Smith." Rube explained. "Smith! Right away, when I heard that, I smelled a rat."

He opened the door and they followed him in. The office was bare of furniture. But Mr. Smith had been busy and in an extraordinary manner. The plaster had been ripped off one wall in a space about as big as the lower half of a door.

"Cuttin' his way right into Adrian's office, he was," said Rube. "Planning' to get in there and clean the place out. But that's not all, Red. We know who he is!"

"Mercy!" murmured the inspector.

"Yes, sir. There was prints all over the office, so I had them photographed and checked. Guy has a record. His name's Slick Williams, and he's a well-known petty thief and small-time cracksman. When we bring him in, boss, the case'll be closed."

Bradley shook his head sadly. "It's a fine piece of work, Rube," he conceded. "But there are one or two rather upsetting features. For instance"—Bradley paused while he held a match to his pipe—"did Williams get tired of trying to carve this hole through the wall and just walk in by the front door and shoot Adrian?"

"No, Red. Adrian must of caught him at it."

"And invited him in for a drink? And while they're having the drink in comes Gregory and they slug him with the bottle? Then Williams shoots Adrian, opens the safe, and doesn't take anything!" Bradley shook his head. "Williams didn't do it, Rube. Oh, no! Not a petty little thief who cuts holes in walls. It doesn't tie in with things. But it's a nice coincidence, a very nice coincidence. And there's just a chance your Mr. Williams may have seen or heard something that'll help us quite a lot."

A crestfallen Rube led them out of the empty office. In the hall Larry said:

"If you don't want me any more this morning, Bradley, I'd like to get back to work. There's a lot to be done."

"Sure," said Bradley.

The rest of the day dragged interminably. Neither Larry nor Ellen felt like working. They were waiting anxiously to hear from Mickey, but it was nearly five o'clock when Mickey, looking tired and discouraged, finally put in an appearance.

"Gee, Mr. Storm, I did the best I could," he said, unhappily. "Bones must of just gone up in smoke!"

"I know you did everything you could, Mickey," Larry said gently. "Now you'd better get home. Drop around in the morning, in case there's any news."

"Gee, Mr. Storm, would you mind if I telephoned you tonight at your house before I go to bed?" Mickey asked.

"Sure, kid. Call up—only I may not be there."

Mickey shuffled out of the office. Ellen looked at Larry. "Where do you

plan to be?" she asked with a faint smile.

"All right, baby, keep riding that horse if you want to," he said. "I *am* going to see Lucia. Bradley's probably talked to her by now. I want to know how she came out. I want to know how I stand with Bradley if he knows now why I went to Adrian's last night."

Ellen came back sharply. "I can't help it! We're out to get a murderer, and it just happens that a pair of good-looking legs doesn't spread a fog in front of my eyes. I listened to you last night when you were explaining about the missing gun. There had to be some reason why the murderer waited so long in the other room. You said it was Lon, mooning over his lost treasures."

"So what?"

PLAINLY Ellen was restraining her impatience only with difficulty.

"Simply that, Teacher, since you no longer believe Lon did it, that explanation doesn't make sense. Why should some one else moon over those stamp books for half an hour? You don't know. And I'll tell you why you don't know. Because there isn't a good explanation, and without one Lucia's story goes to pieces."

"Her story makes perfect sense," Larry said, feebly.

"Does it? Hasn't it occurred to you it might have been Lucia who arrived at the office while Gregory was talking to Adrian. Isn't it quite possible that *she* slugged Gregory and shot Adrian. Wouldn't *she* have looked over the stock books to see if Adrian had the missing stamps from her father's collection?"

"But why call me in at all, then?" asked Larry.

"Because she got panicky," said Ellen, "and left her fingerprints all over the place. She was afraid to go back, so she invented that cock-and-bull story, about the gun because she wanted you to think just what you did think—that some one had been there while she was there!"

"And I suppose she knocked Bones over the head and concealed him in her handbag," Larry was growling when the phone interrupted. He picked it up. "Hello."

"I've found him," said a harsh, cracked voice.

"What? Hello, who is this? What did you say?"

"I said I'd found him!" the voice shouted. "This is Julius, you fool. I've found your boy. He's at One-Twenty-One East Forty-seventh Street," said Mr. Julius. "Second floor to the left. He's been drugged, but he's all right. You'd better get up here in a hurry. I want my supper!"

In a crazy, hair-raising ride uptown neither Larry nor Ellen spoke. Their cab drew up in front of a brownstone house. They ran up the stairs. A door at the end of the hall was open and they made for it. Inside was a quietly furnished living room. On a couch in the corner they saw Bones. Mr. Julius was standing over him.

"Doctor just left," said Mr. Julius. "He's had a severe overdose of some drug. He'll have to sleep it off, but he'll be sound enough in a day or two."

"Can he be moved?" Ellen asked.

"If you can carry him."

"But how did you find him here? Whose place is this?"

"You fool," said Mr. Julius. "Didn't you see the card on the door? This apartment is inhabited by one Ezra Luckman! I got in through bribery and corruption."

Larry sprang to the telephone in the corner of the room and dialed police headquarters. A moment later he had Bradley.

"Well, Inspector, we've got your murderer for you," he said.

"Oh, so you've got him!" Bradley's voice sounded strangely cold and unfriendly. "You'd better come down and tell me about it."

"I will," said Larry. "Be there in about three-quarters of an hour." He turned away from the phone. "The inspector's a little miffed because we beat him to the draw," he said.

"Humph!" said Mr. Julius. "I'm going. Want my supper!" He was chuckling as he left. "Thought a house-to-house canvas was a joke, eh?"

They wrapped Bones in a warm blanket and took him straight to Larry's apartment. As soon as Bones had been tucked in the guest-room bed, Larry left him in charge of Ellen and Lon Nicholas and went directly to the inspector's office. Bradley stared at him stonily as he walked in.

"Now don't be sore, Bradley," Larry

said, cheerfully. "I don't want any credit for this. As a matter of fact, I don't deserve any. It was that old geezer you met at my office this morning who cracked the case."

"Really!" Bradley's eyes were frosty. "Tell me about it."

"Well, I have to confess now that I was holding back a thing or two," Larry said. "You see, Nicholas *was* at my place until about five yesterday; then he got away, took his gun. He was drunk and swearing vengeance. I was sure he hadn't killed Adrian, but he'd have made a perfect fall guy for you cops."

AN EXPRESSION of gloom came over the inspector's face. He shook his head.

"The stupid, stupid police," said Bradley.

"Wait, Bradley, there's more." Larry explained about the disappearance of Bones, and where he had finally been found. "It was old Julius," he concluded, "who decided the thing to do was to check on everybody who had it in for Adrian. The main object was to find the boy, and of course, incidentally, the murderer."

"Sure, just incidentally," said Bradley. "And you found the kid at Luckman's apartment?

"Right."

"So Luckman is the murderer?"

"Q.E.D.," said Larry, expansively.

Bradley stood up. "Come with me," he said.

He led Larry along a corridor, down a couple of flights of stairs, and presently flung open a door at the end of a basement passageway. A strong odor of chemicals and disinfectant reached Larry.

"This," said Bradley, "is the morgue! Come on."

Larry's hands tightened at his sides, but he followed. Bodies, covered with sheets, lay on a series of slabs. Bradley stopped beside one of them and, without comment, bent down and pulled the sheet away from the face of the corpse. It was Luckman, still smiling sardonically in death!

Bradley's voice beat in on his stunned consciousness.

"— killed with the same gun that was used on Adrian," the inspector was saying. "And it wasn't suicide. Understand? *It wasn't suicide!* And now, Mr. Storm, we'll stop playing games and you'll come clean!"

* * * * *

They were back in Bradley's office. "B-but, Bradley," Larry stammered. "How did it happen? Where did you find him?"

"Near the reservoir in Central Park," Bradley snapped. "One of the Park Patrol stumbled over him. He'd been dead a couple of hours when they picked him up. That was at four o'clock this afternoon."

"You're positive it wasn't suicide?"

"Of course I'm positive. No gun anywhere, no powder marks around the wound. He was shot from some distance away. And with the same gun that killed Adrian."

"But if Bones didn't catch him at the scene of the murder, why did he kidnap him?" Larry wanted to know. "If we can find that out, we'll probably know who killed him."

"I'm going to do the finding out from now on!" Bradley said. He walked over to his desk and sat down. "And Im going to begin with you, Storm. You've been holding out long enough."

"I haven't been holding out," Larry said. "At least, nothing that mattered. I've already told you about Lon Nicholas. He certainly didn't kill Luckman. He has been at my apartment all day."

"How do you know?"

Larry's tongue moistened his lips. "Why—why, I just left him. He told me he hadn't been out of the place. Besides, he hasn't got his gun any more. He lost it—lost it yesterday afternoon."

"Oh, he lost it yesterday afternoon!" said Bradley. "Sure. Maybe that's why you came to Adrian's office last night—to cover up for your little pal, Lon."

"It wasn't Lon," said Larry. "I—" He stopped abruptly.

"So it *was* the girl!" Bradley said. "Have I got to drag everything out of you, Storm? You went there to cover up for Lucia Warren. You were going to get rid of her fingerprints. Well, I've got 'em. I know she was there."

"Yes, she was there," Larry agreed. "You see, she had come downtown to see me, and we missed connections. She—"

"I'll get that part from her person-

ally," Bradley interrupted. "She's on her way down here now. What I want is your story! You came to Adrian's office to destroy evidence. She told you there was a gun on the desk, didn't she?"

IT WAS going to be difficult to justify himself to Bradley. Larry could see that.

"Yes," Larry admitted. "She went to see Adrian, and found him dead. The gun was on his desk. She picked it up. I wasn't going to take the gun, Inspector. I was just going to wipe her prints off it, and the phone and desk."

"Mercy, but you're noble," Bradley said. "You take a header for a good-looking dame and you're willing to risk going to the chair yourself to cover up for her."

Larry shook his head doggedly. "She didn't kill him, Inspector. Can't you get it into your head that she was the last person in the case who wanted Adrian dead? And what are you trying to say—that she kidnaped Bones and put him in Luckman's apartment, and then walked out into the Park and shot Luckman?"

"Maybe she and Luckman were in cahoots," said Bradley. "Maybe they had a falling out over the division of the spoils."

"What spoils? You've said yourself that nothing was taken from Adrian's office."

"I didn't say it," Bradley contradicted. "Louderbach said it. How do I know if he's telling the truth? In a cock-eyed business where you don't take inventory of your stock, how can any one tell what's gone?"

A uniformed policeman stuck his head in the office door.

"The Warren dame is here, Inspector," he said.

"Show her in," said Bradley. "We'll see how these two stories jell!"

When Lucia saw Larry, getting up from the chair beside the inspector's desk, she drew a sharp breath. "Larry, I've gotten you into trouble!" Lucia cried.

Larry took her hands in his for a moment.

"I wish it were as simple as that, Lucia. Things have taken a rather bad turn. There's been another murder. A man named Luckman. He was a customer of Adrian's. I—"

"If Mr. Storm doesn't mind," Bradley cut in, "I think *I'll* conduct this interview. Sit down, Miss Warren. I hope Mr. Storm will advise you that the time has come for you to put your cards on the table."

Lucia took the chair which Larry had vacated.

"He told me long ago that the only thing I could do was to tell you the exact truth," she said.

Bradley's eyebrows went up. "That surprises me! Well, I want the whole story—from you, Miss Warren.

"What Mr. Storm told you at my apartment the other night is true, Inspector," Lucia said, in a low voice. "I had every reason in the world to want Adrian alive. He had cheated me out of a large sum of money. Mr. Storm was helping me to get it back."

"Go on," said Bradley.

"Last night I had an appointment with Mr. Storm at his office—that was at six. Somehow we missed connections. I—well, I was pretty angry about

[*Turn page*]

what Adrian had done to me, and I decided to face him with it, so I called his office for an appointment. He told me some one was coming to see him at seven, but that he'd be free at seven-thirty. I had dinner at a little restaurant and at seven-thirty I went up to his office. When I got there I—I found him dead." She paused, her lower lip caught between her teeth. "On the corner of his desk I saw a gun, and foolishly I picked it up."

Bradley leaned forward. "What sort of a gun?"

"It was a pistol, or a revolver, or whatever you call them. I don't know what kind."

"Do you own a gun yourself, Miss Warren?"

"No," Lucia said. "I've never had one in my life."

Bradley shrugged. "Go ahead. You picked up the gun—"

"Then I put the gun down. I realized the police should be notified. I went around to the telephone and started to dial. Then—well, frankly, I was terrified, Inspector. I ran. Then I telephoned Mr. Storm and I asked him to come downtown and he said he would."

"Big-hearted Larry," said Bradley.

"He came," Lucia continued, "and he agreed to go up and wipe my fingerprints off the gun and the telephone. But he got there too late, Inspector. Since he didn't actually *do* anything wrong, you can't arrest him, can you?"

BRADLEY ignored her question. "You didn't see any one else in the office or in the building?"

"No."

"Did you notice a bottle on the receptionist's desk, a liqueur bottle?"

"No, I didn't."

"You mean it wasn't there?"

"I don't know, Inspector. I didn't see it."

"How do you account for the fact that there wasn't any gun there when I arrived?"

Lucia spread her hands in a little gesture of bewilderment. "It can only mean that there was some one there after I left, and before you came."

"That would seem to clear you," said Bradley.

"I'm afraid it does, Inspector."

"Like hell is does! We have only your word for it that there ever was a gun there. Did you know Ezra Luckman?"

"I never heard of him till Larry mentioned him just now."

"What were you doing this afternoon?"

"I haven't been out of my apartment today till your man came for me," she told him. "The elevator operator and the doorman should be able to vouch for me."

"Sure," said Bradley. His anger and irritation were apparently mounting. "All the same, I'm going to ask you to wait here, Miss Warren, until the men who are searching your appartment report to me and I have your alibi checked."

"I'll wait," Lucia said.

The uniformed officer stuck his head in the door again. "Nicholas is here, Inspector."

"Hold him till I'm ready to talk to him," said Bradley.

"Okay, Inspector. "And," the man added, "they've found the gun!"

Bradley gave Lucia a triumphant glance. "So they found it, eh?"

"They're almost certain, Inspector. The ballistics man hasn't tested it, but the caliber checks and two shots have been recently fired from it. It's on the way down here now."

"Well, Miss Warren, how do you explain that?" Bradley asked.

Lucia was twisting her gloves into a tight knot. "I—I can't explain it!" she whispered.

"Hey, Inspector," said the uniformed man, "it wasn't the boys at Miss Warren's who found it. The gun was in Ezra Luckman's top bureau drawer! It beats all how it got there, after him being shot to death about a mile away in the Park."

Bradley stood staring at the policeman for a minute. Then he seemed to make up his mind. "Hold Nicholas as I told you," he ordered, then turned to Larry and Lucia. "You're to stay where I can get hold of you at a moment's notice," he warned. "Now get out!"

VII

MR. JULIUS lived on Eighth Street. As Larry and Lucia rode uptown, Larry told her about Bones's disappearance and his subsequent recovery by Mr. Julius. He told her about Luckman and Stevens, and Gregory, and

Slick Williams, and the other people who had become involved in the case.

They got out of the taxi at Mr. Julius' house and went into the foyer. Larry rang the fourth floor bell, then lowered his ear to the speaking tube. Presently Mr. Julius' voice came through.

"Well, who is it?"

"Storm! Got to see you."

The front door catch began to click furiously. It continued clicking long after Larry and Lucia had climbed to the second floor and rounded the turn toward the third. By the time they reached the top they were breathless. Mr. Julius stood in the open door.

Larry panted: "This is Miss Warren, Mr. Julius."

"Heard of you," said Mr. Julius, crisply. "Well, great Scott, Storm, show the lady in."

Larry and Lucia preceded Mr. Julius into the apartment. Once inside the door they both stopped, staring around them with awed expressions. Mr. Julius' sitting room was something to behold. There were no bookcases, but hundreds of books had been stacked around the walls in teetering piles. Newspapers from weeks back were scattered on the floor. But the most prominent object in the room was a huge glass aquarium standing on a table behind a couch. There were so many fish in it that collision seemed inevitable.

"Like it?" Mr. Julius' voice broke in sharply on their inspection.

"It's charming!" Lucia managed.

"No frills," said Mr. Julius. "I always say no frills, no affectations where a man lives. I can offer you some port. Never keep hard liquor. Bad for the kidneys."

"We're only stopping for a minute," Larry started to protest..

"Naturally," snapped Mr. Julius. "It's my bedtime." He disappeared, and returned presently with a bottle of port and three glasses. One taste of the wine and Larry knew that this was an experience. He said so.

"Believe in having the best," said Mr. Julius. "Well, I suppose you want details?"

"I'm going to give you some first," Larry said. "Luckman's dead—killed with the same gun that was used to murder Adrian. They found him in the Park near the reservoir. Later they found the gun in Luckman's own bureau drawer."

"*What?*" shouted Mr. Julius. "And he was in the Park?"

"That's right," said Larry.

"It makes everything very complicated," said Lucia.

"That, my dear young woman, is a decided understatement!"

Mr. Julius stood for a moment, frowning. He picked up a biscuit from the table and crumpled it into the aquarium. There was frantic excitement in the fish world.

"My story is simple enough," he said. "Visited a dozen people—Stevens, Gregory, that clerk of Adrian's among 'em. Finally got to Luckman's house. He was out. I roused the landlady and by a combination of bullying and bribing finally got in. The boy was there. That's all there is."

"What time was that?" Larry asked.

"About five," said Mr. Julius. "After I phoned you and the doctor I talked to the woman again. Scared the liver out of her! Oh, she talked. Said she hadn't seen Luckman all day, but she'd heard him moving around in his rooms about four."

Larry put down his glass. "That's interesting, because they found Luckman in the Park about four—and he'd been dead for some time."

"Hmmmm," said Mr. Julius, scowling. "Murderer must have brought the boy *and* the gun to Luckman's apartment. Wanted Bones found somewhere, selected Luckman because he'd killed Luckman. No one to explain. Gun thrown in to make it confusing." Mr. Julius wagged his head sagely. "Better to find the gun than to have the police searching everywhere for it. Police have everything now — except the wits to use on it."

"I suppose you can put all the facts together and supply the answer?" Larry said.

A TWINKLE came into Mr. Julius' eyes. "Not quite. But I can use my brain. This is a stamp murder. What was taken from Adrian's office?"

"Nothing," Larry said.

"How d'you know?"

"Louderbach says so."

"Rubbish!" said Mr. Julius. "Moral certainty Adrian robbed Miss Warren

here. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars' worth, you said. Where are they? Substantial haul, isn't it? Would Louderbach know about 'em. Of course not. Adrian wouldn't let his clerk know he had a fortune in stolen stamps. Why don't you go over Adrian's stuff, Storm—hunt for 'em? If they're gone, well, the murderer must have taken 'em. They'll come on the market sooner or later. Then you've got him!"

Lucia leaned forward. "But, Mr. Julius, isn't it very unlikely that Adrian would have kept the stamps he stole from me at the office, where Louderbach might come across them?"

"Had to keep 'em somewhere," said Mr. Julius. "Office, home, safety-deposit box! Bradley can get you access to all of 'em."

"It's worth a try," agreed Larry. "How do you figure Luckman in this?" he asked.

Mr. Julius made an impatient gesture. "Obviously Luckman stumbled on the truth about Adrian's murder, or the boy's disappearance, or both! Tried blackmail. The murderer played along with him, arranged to meet him in the Park for the payoff, and shot him! Not much danger in that. Very cold today, no one walking for pleasure. I'd have killed the boy myself."

"Mr. Julius!" Lucia exclaimed.

"He wouldn't step on an ant," Larry laughed. "But Luckman ran risks too, Mr. Julius—quite a lot of risk for a little money."

"Who said anything about money?" snapped Mr. Julius. "Keep telling you this is a stamp murder. And don't forget, there's more than one gun in the world."

Larry looked at him, puzzled.

"Your killer doesn't wait to let information get into circulation," said Mr. Julius. "Didn't give Luckman any time at all. If you find out something important from examining Adrian's stock, be ready to act!"

* * * * *

Bradley's men had done an extraordinarily neat job at Lucia's apartment. Larry couldn't see that anything had been disturbed, although Lucia pointed to several things that were not quite in their proper places."

"Very considerate, our Bradley," Larry said.

Lucia removed her hat and coat. She knelt before the fire to light it. Then she sat down on the chintz-covered sofa beside Larry.

For a while they sat looking into the fire. Then Lucia spoke abruptly. "I wish you wouldn't waste time going over Adrian's stock." She reached out and covered his hand with hers. "I can't see that it will do any good. I've accepted the fact that I can't salvage anything now that Adrian is dead. I'd feel terribly guilty if you were to put in all that time on my account."

"But I won't be doing it all on your account, darling," Larry said. "I'm trying to track down a murderer."

"I know," Lucia said. "But it's Bradley's job, Larry. I wish you'd give it up."

"Lon's not out of the woods," Larry told her. "And I have a little account to settle for Bones."

"But, Larry, the murderer didn't hurt Bones! And Lon hasn't been arrested. There's no real evidence against him." Her hand tightened on his. "Larry, Mr. Julius was right. It's dangerous. If you should stumble across something to incriminate the murderer he might hurt you."

"And if anything happened to me, would you grieve?"

Lucia looked down at her left hand, which was clenched in her lap. "I—I couldn't bear it," she said.

HIS SHOULDER touched hers. "Darling," he said, "I'm afraid you're going to be kissed. It has been, lo, these many years since a woman's heart beat with concern for me."

There was nothing trivial about the kiss. Lucia's arm went around his neck and held his lips against hers for a long moment. Then the telephone rang. It was Ellen. Her voice sounded very cool and distant when Larry took the phone from Lucia.

"I'm sorry to keep breaking in on your club meetings," she said, "but Bradley's here. I think it would be a very good idea if you came home. He seems to want to talk to you." . . .

Bradley sat on the edge of Bones's bed, Ellen stood at the foot looking down at the white-faced boy who was trying hard to smile. "Gee, Ellen, I let Larry down," he kept saying. "I didn't mean to, honest!"

"You did fine," Bradley said, gently.

"Inspector Bradley's working with Larry on the case, Bones," Ellen explained.

"Mercy, yes," Bradley drawled. "And we're anxious to know just what happened, Bones."

Bones twisted his head back and forth on the pillow. "That's the trouble," he said, miserably. "I don't *know* what happened. Except somebody hit me."

"And where were you when you were hit, Bones?"

Bones gave Ellen a questioning look. She nodded, reassuringly. "You can tell Inspector Bradley everything," she said. "He already knows what you were doing."

The boy looked up into the inspector's friendly face. "After Lon got away, Ellen sent me down to Adrian's office to see if he'd show up there. I was waitin' in a little cafe just across from Mr. Adrian's. I didn't see Lon, but I saw some other people."

Bradley's eyes contracted slightly. "Well, that's fine," he said, "Who were they?"

"Well, sir, there were quite a few people goin' in and out of the building all the time. Naturally I didn't know them all, Mr. Bradley. But about a quarter of seven I *did* see Mr. Gregory go in. Mr. Hale's secretary, you know. He stayed quite a while."

"Did you see Miss Warren go in, Bones?" Ellen asked, quietly.

"Yeah, I did, Ellen. I didn't know if I ought to tell that. I—I thought maybe Larry. . . ."

"At what time did you see her go in?" Bradley asked.

"Well, sir, I guess it must of been nearly half-past seven when Mr. Gregory came out and went into the corner drug store. It was right then that Miss Warren showed up and went into the building." Bones touched the back of his head gingerly. "I begun to get the jitters when she came out, Inspector. She acted kind of crazy. She almost ran up the street and then I saw her go into a cigar store. Mr. Gregory had acted funny, too. He walked like he was dizzy or tight, and he kept puttin' his hand up to the back of his head. I—I guess I must of been wacky to think it, Mr. Bradley, but I began wonderin' if maybe Lon had got up there without my seein' him. So I decided to go and see for myself."

"You had plenty of nerve," said Bradley.

Bones smiled. "But I never got there, Mr. Bradley. I started up the stairs. I guess I *was* kind of scared. I remember I was whistlin', kind of to keep my nerve up. Then something hit me over the head and I—I woke up here."

Bradley was silent for a long time. "You didn't recognize any one but Gregory and Miss Warren who went into the building?"

"There was no one else I knew, sir."

"Do you know Mr. Ezra Luckman?"

"Gee, I don't, Mr. Bradley. Who is he?"

"The tense of your verb is incorrect," said Bradley. He stood up. "Look, son, you get some sleep now. In the morning you'll be fit as a fiddle. Maybe I'll invite you down to headquarters then to look at some pictures, just in case you might recognize some one else you saw last night."

"I'd be glad to come, Mr. Bradley," Bones said. He looked at Ellen. "I'll go to sleep, Ellen, if you'll wake me up when Larry comes. I want to explain."

"You can talk to Larry in the morning," Ellen said. "He understands all about it, Bones."

"And he's not sore?"

"No, he's not sore," said Ellen, affectionately.

SHE smoothed out Bones' tangled red hair, switched off the light, and joined the inspector, who had retreated to the living room.

Bradley stood stuffing the bowl of his pipe with tobacco. "That kid's pretty crazy about Storm," he said.

"Bones would do anything in the world for Larry," agreed Ellen.

"You, too," murmured the inspector. "Does he know you're in love with him? Or hasn't he time for anything as trivial as that?" he added.

"Aren't you doing some pretty fancy guessing, Inspector?"

"No," said Bradley.

Ellen looked at him and grinned. "Don't tell me you're getting ready to give me fatherly advice, Inspector? My job is being Larry's secretary and I make myself as indispensable as possible to him in his business."

"But you wish his business didn't

involve the Warren girl," Bradley said.

"Larry isn't ready to settle down yet," said Ellen. "When he is, and there's any competition from the Warren girl or anyone else, little Ellen may start throwing her weight around."

Bradley chuckled. "I'd like to be on hand when it happens."

At that moment they heard the sound of a key in the front-door lock. And then Larry came into the room looking very pleased with himself. "Well, Inspector, still at it, I see." He glanced at Ellen. "How's Bones?"

Ellen's voice was crisp. "He's asleep."

"Fine. How about a little Scotch, Bradley? Would you mind getting some ice, Ellen?"

"I would," said Ellen. "Try doing something for yourself." She walked out of the room and left the two men alone."

"Now what is that all about?" Larry asked.

"I think," Bradley said, "she's throwing her weight around."

"What for?"

Bradley grinned. "Better wipe off the lipstick," he advised.

Larry took out his handkerchief and rubbed at his lips. "Confound it!" he said.

"You," remarked Bradley calmly, "are a sucker."

"I'm not up to riddles tonight," Larry said. "What's new?"

"First of all," Bradley said, "I've placed Lon Nicholas under arrest for the murder of Max Adrian."

"Oh, hang it all, Bradley. I had a higher opinion of you than that. Why, any half-wit—"

Bradley interrupted. "I didn't say I thought he was guilty. As a matter of fact, I don't. I checked his alibi for today pretty carefully and I'm sure he never left your apartment. Therefore, he couldn't have killed Luckman. And Luckman and Adrian were killed by the same gun."

"Then why arrest him?"

"We've got a killer running around loose who seems quite prepared to strike again if we get warm," said Bradley. "If I arrest someone, he may think we're satisfied. As you said, your friend Nicholas is a perfect fall guy. We'll hold him for a few days, and meanwhile the murderer may think he's out of danger."

"I see. But it's pretty tough on Lon. Well, now that you've got everybody properly lulled, what next?"

"I wish I knew," said Bradley, unhappily.

Larry sat down. "I saw old Julius after I left you." He told Bradley about his visit. "He keeps stressing the point that this is a 'stamp murder.' He seems to think that if an expert went over Adrian's stock it would bring results. For example, if we found stolen goods, it might point to someone we haven't considered at all. Or, if we find stuff missing, it might help clinch the case against someone who now has the missing items in his possession. It would be quite a job, but it might be worth while."

Bradley smiled. "It's a good idea. As a matter of fact, the reason I came here tonight was to ask you if you'd act as expert for the police department. You'd be paid well, of course."

Larry frowned. "But maybe I might unearth something that would add to the case against Lon!"

"You can forget about him," Bradley said, then looked at Larry. "You don't really expect to find something of that sort?"

"I already have," said Larry. "That stamp I showed you last night—the British Guiana Number Sixteen. Remember, I explained that the letters penciled on the back represented a dealer's code?"

Bradley nodded.

"Well, those letters, 'ORHH' were part of Lon's code—the word 'Dictograph.' We'll probably find more of his stock there, although they're not all marked with his code. But since he's in the clear—" Larry shrugged.

"How about the Warren dame's stamps?"

"We can put in a claim for them, if we find them," said Larry. "Frankly, I'd like the job."

"Then it's yours," said Bradley.

VIII

ELLEN, Larry and a somewhat wobbly Bones arrived at the Nassau Street office the next morning a few minutes past nine. In the dark corridor outside the office they found someone already waiting for them. It was Mr. Paul Gregory.

"I have to see you, Mr. Storm, at once," he said.

Larry unlocked the office door. "I

haven't got very much time, Gregory," he said, "but come inside." He turned to Ellen. "There's a violet-ray lamp at Adrian's; we won't need to take ours. Just my glass, tongs, and the books." He joined Gregory in the inner office. "I'm afraid I haven't anything to report on the green Bear," Larry told him.

"I—I was afraid of that," Gregory said. "I don't know what I'll do if I haven't got it by tomorrow. Mr. Hale is a hard man. He—he'll probably have me jailed. But I want to thank you for not saying anything about it in front of him the other night."

Larry eyed him curiously. "I don't know why I kept still," he said. "Perhaps it was because I thought sooner or later you might come to me with the truth."

Gregory groaned. "You're going to find it out for yourself," he said, "if this is so." He took a folded newspaper from his pocket.

Larry's eye ran down the left-hand column of the exposed page:

NICHOLAS ARRESTED IN STAMP MURDER
HAD THREATENED FIRST VICTIM
NO ALIBI

Stamp Expert to Examine Victim's Collections

Following the arrest last night of Lon Nicholas for the murder of Max Adrian, Nassau Street stamp broker, the police announced that they had engaged Mr. Lawrence Storm, of 64½ Nassau Street, to make an expert examination of the collections of Adrian and Ezra Luckman, the two stamp enthusiasts who were murdered within less than twenty-four hours of each other with the same weapon. It is believed that conclusive evidence against the killer may be obtained by an examination of the victim's stamps—

He handed the paper back to Gregory. "It's true enough," he said. "I'm about to start for Adrian's now."

Gregory looked at Larry with frightened eyes. "Then, there's nothing for it but to tell you exactly what my situation is. Mr. Storm. I—I have been robbing Mr. Hale."

"Well, I'll be blistered!" said Larry. "And getting away with it?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds," said Gregory, miserably. "I mean, my motives were not—not— It's an old story, Mr. Storm. The market. I needed money, bought stocks on margin, and—and my stocks went down. I needed margin if I wasn't to be wiped out."

"So you stole a stamp."

"Yes. Mr. Hale was in Europe at the time, and I took an item which I thought I could replace before he got back. I took it to Adrian to sell, knowing he wasn't particular about the source of his purchases. That's where I made my most terrible mistake."

"Blackmail?" said Larry.

"Oh, it's been awful, Mr. Storm! Adrian would insist on my getting him a certain stamp. Most of the time he'd give me one of inferior quality with which to replace it. Unless Mr. Hale examined things closely he wouldn't notice. But finally Adrian didn't bother with replacements. He began asking for stamps I knew Mr. Hale would miss. The green Bear was the last one!"

"I see."

"Then fate played me an ironic trick, Mr. Storm. My investments prospered. I—I made a lot of money. But Adrian wouldn't sell the stolen stamps back. He wanted to keep me in a spot. But my back's to the wall now, Mr. Storm. I knew you'd find some of those stamps, that they'd be listed in your report and Mr. Hale would find out."

Larry shrugged. "I don't see what I can do."

GREGORY extracted an envelope from an inner pocket. "Mr. Storm," he said, "I have here the inferior duplicates of about a dozen of Mr. Hale's stamps. Would it be worth ten thousand dollars to you to replace those stolen stamps with these?"

Larry stood up so quickly that his chair fell over backwards with a crash. He took a step toward Gregory. "You asked for this!" he said. He gripped Gregory by the shoulder, spun him around, and sent him stumbling out into the office beyond. He came up hard against Ellen's desk. There he turned and pointed a shaking finger at Larry.

"I won't forget this, Storm!" he said.

"Get out!" said Larry and started for him again. But Mr. Gregory wasn't having any more. He scuttled hastily across the office and out the door. . . .

When Larry and Ellen, armed with books and equipment, arrived at Adrian's office about three quarters of an hour later, they found Bradley and Snyder waiting for them. Larry told Bradley about Gregory's visit. While he was

talking, Louderbach came in. He listened to Larry, and then interrupted before Bradley could comment.

"I still contend it's madness to permit a stamp broker to examine this stock unwatched!" he said. "I think I have a legal right to safeguard my late employer's interests by being present."

"He *is* going to be watched," said Bradley, mildly. "I'm leaving my assistant here with Mr. Storm."

Louderbach shook his head. "As if that would suffice! Do you think your man will be astute enough to detect any manipulation that might occur? This man Storm wants to prove that Mr. Adrian robbed Miss Warren and you're giving him the opportunity to falsify evidence. You have no right to do it!"

The inspector turned wearily to Snyder. "Rube!" he said.

Rube hunched his shoulders and took a step toward Louderbach. "Scram!" he said. It sounded like the roar of an angry bull. Mr. Louderbach scurried from the room.

"By the way, why *are* you leaving Rube here?" Larry asked.

"Not taking any chances," said the inspector. "I don't want you disturbed. It's just possible someone may not like this idea."

"You expect someone to break in here in broad daylight and take a pot shot at me?" Larry laughed.

"Luckman was killed in broad daylight," pointed out Bradley. "Well, I've had Louderbach open the safes, the desk drawers, the closets—every place anything could be kept in here. All the stock books and loose stamps have been piled on the desk near the door of the Inspection Room. Incidentally, we've also been through Adrian's apartment and I've had his safety-deposit box opened. There were no stamps in either place. But Adrian had a lot of ready cash salted away. Looks as though he was set to leave town in a hurry if the going got tough."

"Trust Max to leave no loop holes." Larry told him. "This may take several days, unless we're lucky."

It was a monumental task that faced Larry and Ellen. Larry settled himself in the big overstuffed chair in the Inspection Room. Ellen had drawn up a table and chair close by. The work was tedious and detailed, and they seemed barely to have made a start when Rube came in from his post in the outer office.

"Ain't you goin' to knock off for lunch?" he asked wistfully. "It's after one o'clock."

Larry glanced up at him. "You toddle off and feed your face, Rube. When you come back, you can bring us some sandwiches and coffee."

"I can't leave you," Rube said. "Orders."

"Oh, go and eat," said Larry. "You can lock the outer door. Nobody can break in."

Rube looked doubtful. "You think it'll be all right?"

"I know it will," said Larry. "Now run along."

Rube came back in about an hour. He had sandwiches and cartons of coffee. Larry and Ellen stopped long enough to eat and smoke a cigarette.

"It's funny," Ellen remarked, "that we haven't found any of the Warren items. Unless Adrian has them hidden somewhere that Inspector Bradley didn't check, we should have. We've been through a lot of U. S. stuff."

"He may have put them with some of the cheap junk, where no one would be expected to look," said Larry.

THEY went back to work, hour after hour. It grew dark and the lights were switched on. Once Larry came across another of Lon's stamps with the code pencilled on the back. This was placed to one side. Once he found an item he was almost certain must have come from Jasper Hale's collection. Finally he encountered the famous green Bear itself. He grinned, mirthlessly.

"What our friend Mr. Gregory wouldn't give for this!"

It was about seven o'clock when Rube reappeared. "Ain't you ever goin' to eat?"

"Not for a while," Larry told him. "Go get your supper, and bring us something in again. Bring a bottle of Scotch with you."

"No liquor," said Ellen. "Not while you're working. Your fingers will get clumsy. Rare hamburgers this time, Rube, and plenty of hot, black coffee. You can get plastered when you've finished, Larry—if you ever finish."

"In two or three hours we'll be through these inventoried ones," said Larry. "Then tomorrow we can tackle the loose stock." He sighed. "It *is*

strange we haven't found any of Lucia's stuff. Thing's a bust so far."

Rube went away, and they heard his key turn in the lock. After a while they heard the key in the lock once more.

"Hey, Rube!" Larry called out. "There are some cigarettes in my overcoat pocket. Bring 'em in, will you?"

Rube didn't answer, but there was the sound of footsteps slowly crossing the waiting room. Abruptly the lights in the waiting room went out.

Larry sprang out of his chair. Ellen stared at him, open-mouthed. She had never seen him move so fast. Two strides took him to the door of the Inspection Room, where he flicked off the light switch, plunging them into darkness. Then, quickly, he was at Ellen's side.

"Get down behind that desk, and *stay* down!" he whispered. "That's not Rube in there!"

They crouched together, scarcely breathing, straining to hear some sound from the intruder. The lights were still burning in Adrian's private office, but the rest of the suite was in total darkness. Larry placed his lips close to Ellen's ear.

"If I could get that other light turned off," he whispered, "we might dodge around in the dark till Rube comes back. I can't just pop out on him, Ellen. He undoubtedly has a gun and he won't hesitate to use it."

Ellen was clinging to his arm. "Larry, please! If—if you get into the light—"

"I can slip out into the waiting room and to the other door of the private office. The switch is right by it. But you must keep still, darling—mustn't stir a finger. Now, chin up, baby. I'm moving."

He started toward the dark doorway, crawling at first on his hands and knees. When he got outside the vague aura of light surrounding the desk he got to his feet, moving cautiously. He reached the door to the waiting room. His groping fingers encountered a key. He hesitated a moment, and then turned the key noisily in the lock.

"Rube," he shouted. "Hurry!"

At the same moment he ducked into the waiting room and around toward the light switch by the door. The man in the private office acted quickly. Ellen, crouching behind the desk had one fleeting glimpse of him, muffled in a long overcoat with a dark hat pulled down over his face. He came swiftly into the light for a moment, running straight into the Inspection Room, and toward the door through which Larry had gone. Ellen jumped to her feet and screamed.

"Larry! He's behind you!"

It was a fatal mistake. The light revealed her figure, and the man turned. There was the dull plop of a silenced gun, a short stab of flame.

"You take the Inspection Room, Rube! I'll take the office way!" Larry's order sounded realistic.

RUNNING feet crossed the waiting room. Fingers fumbled with the door an instant. Larry blundered into the Inspection Room.

"Ellen!"

The outer office door slammed. Larry stumbled blindly toward the light switch once more. He turned up the lights. Ellen lay stretched out on Adrian's thick, Turkish rug, very still.

"Ellen! Ellen, darling!"

He hurried to kneel beside her. Her eyes were closed. There was an ugly dark stain near her left shoulder, spreading out on the dark-blue dress she wore. Larry slipped his hand under her shoulder, cradling her head in the crook of his arm. Gently, quickly, he pulled the dress away from her injured shoulder with his left hand. The bullet had penetrated her flesh very close to the point of the shoulder. He lowered her back onto the carpet, then ran to the water cooler and returned with a dripping paper cup. He moistened his handkerchief in the water, bathed her forehead with it, dabbed gently at the bleeding wound.

He cursed once in a voice of passionate anger, then lifted her again, held her close to him. Ellen's fingers tightened on his arm and she opened her eyes.

"I guess I didn't keep still," she said, unsteadily.

They heard the outer door being unlocked and opened. Ellen clung to Larry.

"Come and get it!" said Rube's cheery voice.

"In here, sap!" Larry called.

Rube was loaded down with paper bags and containers which he was balancing precariously. At the sight of Larry kneeling on the rug with Ellen in his

arms, he stared dumbly.

"Did you pass somebody on the stairs?" Larry demanded.

"Why—why, a guy did pass me," Rube said.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Larry's voice was eager.

"Well, no," said Rube. "What's happened, Mr. Storm? Who was it?"

"That, you brass-bound moron, was the murderer!" Larry said. "He tried to do a job on us and he's wounded Ellen."

Sandwiches, coffee, and pickles cascaded onto Adrian's Turkish rug. In one lumbering movement Rube made for the hall door.

"Wait!" Larry shouted at him. "He's blocks away by now. Go downstairs and get a taxi. Then come back up here and help me with Ellen."

"I gotta report to the inspector," Rube said.

"You'll get a taxi and you'll come back up here on the run," Larry said, savagely, "or so help me, you'll think you've been put through a meat grinder!"

Rube went off at a gallop. Larry pulled the seat cushion out of the overstuffed chair and placed it under Ellen's head. Then he went to the private office.

A moment later Ellen heard his voice barking into the private-office telephone. "Dr. Donlin? Larry Storm speaking. Get your stuff together and come down to my apartment, pronto. My secretary's been shot. It's a shoulder wound; bleeding, but not badly. We're in an office downtown. I think it'll be safe to move her, don't you? We should get to the apartment about the same time you do. Step on it!"

He paused to gather up overcoats and hats, and then went back to the Inspection Room. Almost at the same time, Rube, panting for breath, returned with the announcement that a cab was waiting.

Larry slipped into his overcoat, pulled on his hat, and picked Ellen up in his arms. He turned to Rube. "Bring the rest of our junk, bright boy! And when you call the inspector, ask him if he ever bothered to check that key ring of Adrian's for the outside-office key!"

Half an hour later, at Larry's apartment, Dr. Donlin announced that Ellen's wound was not serious.

"Can you stay here about an hour, Don," Larry asked. "I don't want Ellen left alone, and there's one guy I've got to check on right away. If he hasn't got an alibi for tonight, there's going to be a third murder!"

"Sure, I'll stay, Larry," the doctor agreed.

IX

A TAXI pulled up in front of Jasper Hale's house on Fifth Avenue. "I want to see Mr. Gregory and Mr. Hale, at once," Larry said.

"They're in Mr. Hale's study," said Halliday, "but I'm afraid—" He was talking to Larry's back, as Larry pushed past him and flung open the door of Jasper Hale's study. Hale was sitting at his desk with Gregory beside him, evidently taking notes on a shorthand pad. At the sight of Larry, Jarper Hale stood up.

"Well, Mr. Storm, you seem to go in for extraordinarily high-handed informality."

But Larry wasn't looking at Hale. His gaze was fixed on Gregory. "Where have you been tonight—every minute tonight?" Larry demanded.

Jasper Hale, tall and gaunt, stepped forward. "You're not of the police, Mr. Storm. If you have something to ask Gregory, be good enough to do it in a civilized fashion."

Larry's eyes didn't waver. "Somebody tried to murder me tonight, Mr. Hale, and came within an inch or two of killing my secretary. This punk did his best this morning to get me to cover up some of his crooked operations. He didn't want me to go over and check Adrian's collection."

"Why?" asked Hale.

"Take time to examine your collection some day, Mr. Hale," Larry said. "I've got a hunch you'll be looking for a new secretary. This miserable worm has been stealing from you. He knew I was going to find it out and he was desperate. Tonight some one tried to shoot me. I just want to make certain it wasn't Gregory."

Jasper Hale's beetling eyebrows lowered. "Is this true, Gregory?"

"It's a lie," Gregory shouted. "I never stole anything!"

"You can check for yourself, Mr. Hale," Larry said. "I've seen three or four stamps today that I'm sure belong

to you. But I've waited long enough. Are you going to talk, Gregory, or do I drag you out of here?"

Gregory was sobbing hysterically. Jasper Hale spoke. "If what you say is true, Storm, I owe you something for telling me. But as for attempting to kill you, I must say that Gregory is in the clear. He hasn't been out of this house since six o'clock tonight.

"How do you know? Has he been with you all the time?"

"No," said Hale. "But I'm positive he hasn't been out." He turned to the butler, who still stood at the door. "Did Mr. Gregory leave the house after he came in at six o'clock?"

"No, sir," said Halliday, promptly.

"How do you know?" Larry shot at him. "Were you guarding the doors?"

"No, sir," said Halliday. "But you can't open the front door without a bell ringing in the kitchen. And the back door is right by the kitchen. I can assure you Mr. Gregory hasn't been in or out that way."

"The only other entrance," said Jasper Hale, "is here." He pointed to a door at the far end of the study, which Larry had assumed led to a lavatory. "He didn't use that, because I haven't been out of this room for several hours."

Larry drew a deep breath. "I apologize for creating so much disturbance," he said to Hale. "But I had to make certain."

"I quite understand," said Jasper Hale, coldly. "And may I say, that if, upon investigation, I discover you're right about Gregory, I may be able to show my gratitude in some tangible fashion. . . ."

THE blank he had drawn at Jasper Hale's had not changed Larry's combative mood. When he walked into his own living room a while later, he found Donlin and Inspector Bradley sitting by the fire.

"I might have known I'd find you here, Bradley," he snorted.

Donlin stood up. "Well, I'll be getting along now." He dropped a hand on Larry's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about Miss Dixon, Larry. If you *can* keep her in bed tomorrow, which I very much doubt, it would be better. Send her to see me Saturday."

"She'll stay in bed!" said Larry. He went out to the foyer to help Donlin with his coat and hat. When the doctor had gone he rejoined Bradley.

"I owe you an apology," said Bradley. "Rube gave me your message. You were right. The key to the outside door was missing. The murderer must have taken it when he left so hurriedly on Tuesday night. Find anything at Adrian's before the fireworks?"

"Nothing too illuminating," said Larry. "I found one or two more of Lon's stamps and some I'm sure belonged to Hale. Incidentally I've just come from Hale's. It wasn't Gregory who visited us tonight."

"How about the stamps from the Warren collection?"

"Not a smell of one."

"Isn't that odd?"

"It's very odd," said Larry.

Bradley looked at him meditatively. "But we're on the right track, don't you think? Definitely, the murderer didn't want you messing around with Adrian's stock."

"I wonder," said Larry. "He gave me plenty of time, Bradley—all day, to be precise. If I had found anything, I'd have telephoned you at once. He must have guessed that, but he waited. Why?"

"I've been thinking about that, too," said Bradley. "You know, Storm, the announcement in the papers said you were going over both Adrian's and Luckman's stamps. Do you suppose it's Luckman's collection he's worried about?"

Larry stared at the inspector. Then he laughed, mirthlessly. "If that's the case, he'll have been to Luckman's and destroyed whatever it is he doesn't want us to find."

"No," said Bradley, "he won't. Because I sealed up the apartment after Luckman was killed and I've had a man there to see no one went in."

"Then I think you've hit it," Larry said, a touch of excitement in his voice. I'm too tired or I'd go over there tonight."

"It can wait," said Bradley. "We've got our fingers on all our suspects. None of them is going to leave town."

Larry laughed. "Our suspects! Who are they? Lon's cleared. Gregory seems to be cleared. Luckman is definitely cleared. I refuse to believe Lucia Warren is a murderess. Who, my good fellow, are our suspects?"

"Had you realized," Bradley asked, "that we've never considered Mr. Louderbach very seriously?"

"Is there a shred of evidence against him?"

"Not a shred," said Bradley, cheerfully. "Of course, we haven't any real evidence against any one, excepting the people who are cleared." He tapped out his pipe against an andiron. "But things have happened today that I haven't had a chance to tell you about. We picked up Slick Williams!"

"The safe-breaker who rented the next office?"

Bradley nodded. "We wangled a confession of his intentions out of him. He worked in the evenings, cutting through the wall. Naturally, he had to wait till every one had gone home from Adrian's office. Tuesday night he was waiting, impatiently. People were coming and going all evening, he said. Along about seven-thirty he heard a shot fired in there. That got his wind up. He waited a minute or two and then started out of his place. Just as he stepped into the hall somebody—a man—ran out of Adrian's office with blood streaming down the side of his face."

"Gregory?"

THE inspector made a vague gesture with one hand and nodded.

"I guess so," said Bradley. "Well, Williams waited for a bit, and then started out again. This time he almost ran head on into Lucia Warren going into Adrian's. He couldn't see from his office door very well, so instead of going back in there he ducked into the men's washroom at the end of the hall. There was someone in the washroom, a man who was being violently sick at his stomach!" "Howard Stevens!"

"In person," said Bradley. "I had him picked up this afternoon. He says he went to Adrian's Tuesday evening. He was going to plead with Adrian to let him have a fair price for his collection. He walked in, and there was Gregory lying on the floor, with blood all over the place. Mr. Stevens ducked into the washroom because he can't stand the sight of blood."

"The whole town was there that night!" Larry exclaimed.

"Looks like it," said Bradley, and gazed into the fire for a long time. Finally he looked up. "Don't hit me if I ask you a simple question, will you, Storm?"

"What?"

"Have you ever thought of your friend Mr. Julius as a possibility?"

"*Mr. Julius!*"

"He can't account for his time, Storm. At least I don't think he can. And there're a couple of other points. The murderer must be a man with some decent impulses. If he weren't, he'd have wiped out that kid of yours. Mr. Julius is fond of the boy, isn't he?"

"But, Bradley—"

"You can't get away from the fact that Mr. Julius *found* Bones," Bradley said. "You thought his idea of a house-to-house canvass was crazy. And, it *was* crazy, Storm! Yet it worked. Mr. Julius found him without much difficulty at all. I'm only saying that it's possible we'd better look into Mr. Julius."

"But, Bradley, you've got nothing to connect him with either Adrian or Luckman!"

"We have stamps. They tie every one into this case, as Mr. Julius himself said. Mr. Julius is an eccentric. If somebody harmed him, it would be quite in character for him to take justice into his own hands. And he wouldn't stand for blackmail—not that old bird!"

Larry nodded slowly. "No, he wouldn't."

"And he wouldn't hurt the boy," said Bradley. "Yes he had to have him found." Bradley shrugged. "So, he found him!"

Larry stood staring into the fire. Bradley got up from his chair.

"This isn't a nice case, Storm," he said, gently. "If you want to back out now, I won't hold it against you. It might not be pleasant if what you find at Luckman's should clinch the case against some one you're fond of."

Larry didn't look up for a minute, but when he did the flame of anger was rekindled in his eyes.

"Whoever it is nearly did for Ellen tonight," he said. "He was out to get me. I'm sticking."

Bradley smiled. "I had an idea you would Storm. But I thought I'd give you the chance. What time will you be ready to go to Luckman's tomorrow?"

Larry's lips tightened. "I've got one little personal job to do," he said. "I'd like to put off going to Luckman's till around noon."

"Okay," said Bradley. "That per-

sonal job hasn't anything to do with Miss Warren, has it?"

"It has," said Larry, grimly. "I'm going to call on a Mr. George Walpole. He was Colonel Warren's lawyer and executor of the estate. I think I know where Lucia fits into this picture, and if I'm right— Well, it's going to be an interesting morning."

X

BURLY Rube Snyder was waiting in the foyer of the apartment building when Larry got downstairs next morning. There was a bulge on the right side, which was obviously made by a service revolver.

Larry looked at him and laughed. "No slips today, eh, Waldemar?"

Rube growled something unintelligible. They walked out onto the street, side by side, Rube casting a searching look in both directions as they got into a taxi, which took them to a Wall Street office building. Rube would not wait in the cab. He had orders this time. So they went up to the offices of Mr. George Walpole together. The switchboard operator announced Mr. Storm, and a moment later Larry was told that Mr. Walpole would see him.

"This is as far as you go, sweetheart," Larry said. "Mr. Walpole is harmless."

"I got orders," said Rube, stubbornly.

"You wait here," said Larry. "You can shoot anybody who tries to interrupt us if you're so anxious to use that blunderbuss." He went into Mr. Walpole's private room.

After about half an hour Larry came out. He didn't seem to see Rube. The muscles along the line of his jaw were bulging and his eyes had an angry glitter. Rube got up hastily and followed him.

They picked up a cab and Larry gave an address.

"That's the Warren dame's dump, isn't it?" Rube said.

Larry's lip tightened. "Quite right, Waldemar."

"My real name is Arthur," said Rube, hopefully.

But Larry was silent. He did not speak once on the trip uptown. His eyes stared out the window, cold and unseeing.

In the foyer of Lucia's apartment house Larry had himself announced. "This is where we part company again," he said to Rube.

"I ought to come up," said Rube. "The inspector will be sore."

"Wait here!" Larry said, so sharply that Rube took an involuntary step backwards.

Lucia was waiting in the doorway for him. He walked past her into the apartment, without greeting.

"What's gone wrong, Larry?" Lucia asked. She followed him into the living room.

"Nothing," Larry's eyes were bleak. "I haven't been able to forget my last visit here."

"Nor I," said Lucia. "Sit down, Larry—here on the couch."

He sat down. "You were so sweet, Lucia. You were so concerned about me and the dangers I might be running into. Oh, there were risks, all right. As a matter of fact, somebody tried to murder me."

"Larry!"

"From your point of view," he continued, coldly, "his failure was a bad break."

"Larry, what are you talking about?"

"It's going to be painful to go through this, he said. "Perhaps we can avoid it if you'll just hand them over."

"Hand what over, Larry?"

"The stamps you stole from your father's collection."

"Are you out of your mind?"

Larry sighed. "I see you insist on playing out the string," he said. "Well, I've just come from seeing George Walpole. I'm working for him now—for your father's estate. I want those stamps."

"I don't think I'll listen to any more of this," said Lucia.

"You'll listen and like it," said Larry. "Adrian never stole any stamps from you. It's probably the one rotten thing in the world he *didn't* do! *You* stole those stamps out of your father's collection and replaced them with inferior items. And when Mr. Walpole became suspicious of the salvage value of the collection, you had to put the blame on some one. It was a toss-up between Adrian and me. You came to see both of us and decided that Adrian's reputation made him the best bet. His death was a break for you, until you found out that I was going to go over his

stock. You didn't want that because you knew that I wasn't going to find them because you had them here. And so you became sweetly worried about my personal safety."

THERE was a bitter sneer on the girl's lips now.

"Stop it!" Lucia cried.

"You got another break," said Larry. "When Bradley's men searched this place they weren't looking for stamps. They were looking for a gun. It's going to be different this morning, my pet. I'm going to give you about thirty seconds to turn those stamps over to me, and if you don't, *I'm* going to do the searching."

She walked over to the table and picked up the phone. "There's a man annoying me," she said, calmly. "Please send some one up to get him out of here."

Larry brushed past her and picked up the phone himself. "There's a city detective in the lobby. Put him on." His eyes were on Lucia as he waited. "Rube? Come upstairs to Fourteen-B and stand outside the door. If any one tries to come in, keep 'em out. I don't want to be disturbed." He replaced the phone on the hook with a bang.

"I suppose you've figured out a motive to back up this idiotic charge?" Lucia said.

"You supplied the motive at the very beginning," said Larry. "Mr. Walpole filled out the details for me this morning. Money! Your father always supported you lavishly. You thought when he died you were going to be able to continue on the same scale, and you ran up enormous bills accordingly. You were sunk, Lucia, when you found out that instead of inheriting from the estate in cash, you were only to have the income from it. You had to raise the money to pay those bills or be up to your ears in debt for the rest of your life. So you hit on a bright scheme."

"You're quite mad," Lucia said.

"Mr. Walpole knew nothing about stamps," Larry went on, "but you did, my precious Lucia, from your father. You knew how to buy. You acquired a flock of inferior replacements for your father's collection. And Mr. Walpole never had a suspicion until after the auction. Meanwhile, you have those valuable stamps ready to dispose of when things quiet down a bit. It's a swindle that would have done credit to Adrian himself."

Larry stood up. "Well, do you hand them over or do I look for them?"

"I haven't any stamps," Lucia said, unsteadily.

He walked over to Lucia's desk, pulled out the drawers, and dumped their contents. He pawed everything over, but he did not find what he was looking for. He went into Lucia's bedroom, pulled out the bureau drawers. Suddenly he came up with a jewel case. He picked out the top tray. Rings and necklaces clattered to the floor. He emptied the bottom half. He heard Lucia give a little gasp and his lips tightened. His fingers explored. At last something gave. An envelope lay in the false bottom of the leather case. He took it out, throwing the case into a corner of the room. He ripped open the envelope and glanced at its contents.

"Are they all here?" he demanded.

Lucia was sagging against the doorway. She was beaten.

"They're all there," she said, dully.

XI

WHEN Larry arrived at Luckman's apartment twenty minutes later, Bradley was not there. However, the detective watching the apartment admitted him and he settled down to work. There were several cardboard letter files filled with stamps but inspection showed Larry that these were mostly inferior specimens, though all were salable. Luckman's possession of these dubious items was, however, explained when Larry took a large, morocco-bound album from the drawer of Luckman's desk. This was the works, the real collection. Like so many enthusiasts Luckman had had this album specially prepared. There was a space in it for every known Newfoundland issue, and here were mint-conditioned items, unblemished in every respect. Larry realized that all the stamps in the letter files were duplicates of the perfect specimens which Luckman had laboriously acquired.

There was only one empty space in the book. Under the square was printed: "No. 10, 1860, one shilling, orange, on laid paper." This was the stamp which Adrian had sold to Paul Gregory with-

out giving Luckman the chance to bid. Larry sat staring at the vacant space for a long time. There was a little torn piece of a stamp hinge attached to the square, and his fingers fiddled with it. He looked at the detective who sat stolidly in the corner of the room, thumbing through a magazine.

"Perfection is a rare thing," Larry said. "This is perfection, but for one missing stamp. You ought to look at it, officer, because you may never see anything like it again."

The detective got up and came across the room. He glanced over Larry's shoulder, scratching his head. "How guys can spend the dough they do on them things is beyond me," he said. "Have you got anywhere, Mr. Storm?"

Larry sighed. "That's the difficulty, my friend. I'm hanged if I can see anything that helps us. So I'm going through it all again."

It was about six when Larry gave up. He called police headquarters, but Bradley was not there and no one seemed to know where he could be reached. So leaving Luckman's apartment, he picked up Rube in the hallway downstairs, and went home. Bones greeted him at the front door. The boy's face looked white and drawn. Larry patted him on the back.

"Still feeling a little rocky, fella?"

Bones turned away quickly. "It isn't that, Larry." His voice shook, as if he were close to tears.

"Ellen!" Larry said sharply. "Is something wrong with her, Bones?"

"No, no, Larry, she's all right. She's in the living room."

Ellen was stretched on the couch, a quilt drawn up over her. Larry went to her, knelt beside the couch. He saw that she had been crying.

"Darling, what on earth is the matter?"

She put her cheek against the lapel of his coat. "Oh, Larry, I can't believe it. He was so—so real, so human!"

"Ellen, what are you talking about?"

"Haven't you been in touch with Bradley?"

"No, I haven't seen him all day."

Ellen turned her eyes away. "It's Mr. Julius, Larry. Why didn't you tell me that Bradley suspected him? It would have prepared me."

"Tell me what's happened!"

"It's all in the afternoon papers," Ellen said. "Bradley put a man to watch Mr. Julius. This morning Mr. Julius went out. He went into a restaurant for a late breakfast. During breakfast he went into the washroom. He didn't come out. The detective finally went in after him. Mr. Julius had gone, escaped through a window at the back. Bradley says it's as good as a confession. They've got a general alarm out for him."

"So he ducked out on them? Now why would he do that? Bradley had no real evidence against him."

"But you, Larry. He was afraid of what you'd find today. Was there something to incriminate Mr. Julius at Luckman's?"

"That's the strange part of it, Ellen. There wasn't anything to convict any one. I—I think we must have gone wrong on our reasoning. Luckman had a beautiful collection, perfect except for that Missing Number Ten, but as far as a clue to the killer goes, there was—" He stopped short, staring.

"Larry, what is it? Was there something after all?"

HE STRODE over to the sideboard and poured himself a drink. "I've got to think," he said. "There was something and I didn't see it at the time."

"Mr. Julius?"

"Not Mr. Julius. I admit I wouldn't put murder past him, if he thought he was right. But he'd take his medicine if he were trapped, and not go around taking pot shots at people." He drained his glass. "If I'm right, it's weird!"

He walked up and down the room, puffing at his cigarette. Suddenly the phone rang. He picked it up.

"Hello? Yes, this is Storm. . . . What's that? . . . I see. And who are you? . . . Very well, I'll come at once."

He put down the phone. "It seems," he said slowly, "that some one's broken into our office downtown. They want me to come and see whether anything of value's been taken."

"Who called you, Larry?" Ellen asked.

A faint smile flickered on Larry's lips. "The night watchman."

"But, Larry, there isn't any night watchman in the building!"

"I know," said Larry, softly. "There isn't any night watchman."

He walked slowly toward the door. "Larry!" Ellen cried: "Don't be a fool! It's a trap."

"Traps aren't dangerous when you know about them ahead of time," he said. "Besides I think I know who it is, and I can handle him. Take it easy. I'll be back—soon."

In the elevator, he spoke to the operator. "Take me all the way down to the basement," he said. "I don't want that flatfoot in the lobby to know I'm going out."

A short time later Larry stopped his taxi about a block from his office and paid off the driver. He stood for a minute, looking up and down Nassau Street. Then he walked slowly toward 64½. The entryway was dark. George, the elevator man, had gone home. Larry began the long climb up the winding stairs, six flights of them. When he reached the seventh floor he paused. There was not a sound in the building.

Slowly Larry walked along the corridor that led to his office. There was no light tburning behind the plate-glass door. He tried the knob. The door was unlocked, and he opened it. The office was pitch-dark. Larry's fingers crept along the wall till they touched the light switch. He waited, straining to hear some sound. Then it came to him—the faint creaking of shoe leather. Larry's muscles tensed.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Hale," he said. "I'm going to turn on the lights."

The switch clicked. Jasper Hale, gaunt, gray, was standing with his back against Ellen's desk. In his right hand he held an automatic.

Larry moistened his lips. "This has to end, Mr. Hale," he said. "You can't cover murder with murder forever."

"Why did you come if you knew?" Hale asked. His voice was tight, strained.

"Because the game is up," said Larry, quietly. "I thought I could persuade you that further killing is useless."

"You're a fool," said Hale. "Do you suppose I got you here just to talk?"

"No," Larry said, slowly, "you hoped to get rid of me before I told some one about that stamp hinge in Luckman's collection."

"Yes," Hale said. "That was my only mistake."

"Missing me at Adrian's office was another," said Larry.

"That," said Hale, "can be remedied —now!"

From outside came the wail of a fire engine screaming its way along Nassau Street. There was nothing in Hale's eyes to suggest that he could be swayed. Only ten yards separated Larry from the automatic.

"Drop it, Hale!"

Larry's heart jammed hard against his ribs. The voice came from behind him—Bradley's voice.

For one instant Hale's pale eyes turned away from Larry, and in that instant Larry moved. He charged at the gaunt figure of the millionaire, head down, in a flying tackle. The whole room seemed to explode in his face. There was a fire from Hale's gun, a jarring blow on the side of his head—and darkness.

LARRY opened his eyes. He was sitting in the leather chair in his own private office. Ellen was kneeling beside him."

"Feel better, Storm?" The voice was Bradley's.

"I guess so," Larry said. He saw Bones. He saw Mr. Julius, peering over Bones's shoulder.

"When you put on that charge of the Light Brigade I thought your goose was cooked," said Bradley.

Larry looked at Ellen. "What's going on? How did you get here?"

"I called the inspector when you left the apartment," she said. "I couldn't reach him. So I called out the fire department." She laughed. "The inspector was here all the time. Had the building surrounded."

"The fire department!"

"I couldn't think of anything else," Ellen said.

"Smart girl," said Mr. Julius. "She couldn't know that Bradley was playing games. I was a decoy. Let the murderer think he suspected me, then watch."

"Oh, please shut up," said Larry, wearily. His eyes turned to Bradley. "How the devil *did* you get here?"

Bradley shrugged. "I went to see Mr. Julius to question him about his alibi for the time of the murder. Then we got talking about the case. The murderer had made it quite clear that he was afraid of you, Storm—wanted to get you out of the way. It occurred to

me that if he thought our attention was directed somewhere else, he might make a move. Mr. Julius agreed to help. We gave out the news that he was wanted, had given us the slip. Actually he spent the day in my apartment."

"But how did you get on to Hale?" asked Larry.

"He was the one person we hadn't checked thoroughly. Hale was a long shot, but I played him. I trailed him personally all day. While he was waiting for you to come down here after that telephone call, I had time to throw a cordon around the building. I could have arrested him for breaking and entering, but I wanted to make a murder charge stick. There was no evidence against him until he tried to get you."

"But there *is* evidence against him," Larry said. "Where is he?"

Bradley moved toward the office door. "Mac, bring the prisoner in here."

A plain-clothes man came in from the outer office leading Jasper Hale by the arm. Hale's right hand was swathed in bandages.

Hale dropped into the swivel chair by Larry's desk. "I underestimated you, Inspector," he said. "I didn't dream you were on my trail."

"I wasn't till today. If you are prepared to make a statement, Hale, I wish you'd explain what all that talk about hinges was you had with Storm before I broke in."

"That's simple enough," said Larry, "and it's the evidence that'll hang him. When I went over Luckman's collection I found it complete except for the Newfoundland Number Ten which Adrian had sold to Hale. But in the empty square marked for it was stuck a fragment of stamp hinge. Now Luckman would never have put any other stamp in that square, and only the day before he'd told me he didn't have a Number Ten. There was only one conclusion to draw from that. Since I'd talked to him he'd acquired one and mounted it."

"But what does that prove?" Bradley asked.

"You had figured that Luckman was killed for attempting to blackmail the murderer," Larry said. "But Luckman didn't want money. He wanted that Number Ten, and apparently he'd gotten it! So it had to be Hale! He gave Luckman the Number Ten, and Luckman mounted it in his book. The next day Hale met him in the Park and killed him. He took Bones and the gun to Luckman's apartment. He couldn't afford to leave that stamp in Luckman's album; but he ripped it out carelessly, leaving a piece of the hinge." He looked at Hale. "Isn't that substantially correct?"

Hale nodded. "It wasn't till I got home that I saw I'd left part of the hinge behind. I knew if you saw it, Storm, the game was up."

"So you tried to knock me off in Adrian's office."

"Precisely," said Hale. "You seem to have been the cause of all my trouble, Storm. It was on your account that I was forced to murder Adrian!"

"*My* account?"

"You frightened Adrian half to death, you and your friend Nicholas," said Hale. "He was preparing to skip town. I couldn't have that."

"*You* couldn't have it?" Larry was genuinely puzzled.

"Don't tell me you haven't tumbled

[*Turn page*]

to the truth, Storm? Adrian and I were in the racket together. I was the brains; he was the front. A retired oil man—that's what I'm supposed to be! My original fortune *did* come from oil. But I've made another one since in stamps. Hundreds of thousands of dollars, all in stamps."

"Then your frequent trips to Europe were on stamp business?" Bradley was making notes.

"Naturally," said Hale. "I've sold thousands of dollars' worth of stolen items to European and Far Eastern collectors. It was I, Mr. Storm, who thought of 'Oscar Rivero.' Your friend Lon Nicholas was only one of many brokers all over the world who fell for Mr. Rivero. And what a laugh we had when that poor fool Gregory began stealing from me. He didn't know he was selling back to me through Adrian."

"So that's why you didn't kill him that night at Adrian's?" said Larry. "You planned to use him later?"

EVIDENTLY this was correct for the veteran stamp broker nodded.

"Your mind is beginning to function!" snapped Hale. "I had to kill Adrian. I couldn't risk having him run out. And I had to get him that night, because he was planning to leave the next day." He cleared his throat. "So I went to his office. When I arrived I found Gregory already there. I went into the Inspection Room and found that bottle standing on the cabinet in the corner. I picked it up and went back into the waiting room. I was standing behind the door when Gregory came out, and I slugged him."

"Why didn't you just hide till he was gone?" asked Larry.

"I didn't want him getting home too soon. I used the side door in my study to go in and out. The servants wouldn't know. But if Gregory found me missing—no alibi. I had to delay him."

"I get it," said Larry.

Hale moistened his lips. "Then I walked into Adrian's office and shot him. I took his keys and opened the safe. There was something there I had to have. Not stamps, Mr. Storm, not stamps! Adrian and I had a written agreement of partnership. I had to have his copy. I had just found it when that Warren girl turned up. That was a tight spot. I had foolishly left my gun on the desk. If she'd discovered me, she might have had the upper hand. But she didn't. She ran. Then I had to leave in a hurry, because I was certain she'd notify the police."

"And then," said Larry, "you met Bones."

"Yes, the boy!" Hale laughed. "I hit him with the butt of my gun and carried him out the back way to my car. I thought the boy, held as a hostage, could be useful to me."

"It might amuse you," said Larry, dryly, "to know that we put that down to a streak of kindliness in the murderer!"

"What about Luckman?" Bradley asked.

Hale's face clouded. "I had the greatest shock of my life when I got out to my car. Luckman was sitting in the front seat, calmly waiting. It seemed he'd been trailing me for days, hoping to get something on me. He wanted that Number Ten. I had to give in. He came back to the house with me, helped me carry the boy in through my private entrance. I gave him the stamp and promised to meet him in the Park Wednesday with money. Mr. Luckman had gotten very bold—too bold for his own good."

"You played it very coolly," said Bradley.

"Why not? I've been playing dangerous games all my life. The next day I went to the Park. The boy, drugged, was on the floor of my car, covered by a robe. I met Luckman and gave him a stomachful of lead. I took his keys, went to his apartment, left the boy and the gun, and tore out the Number Ten. The rest you know. When the police engaged Storm to examine his collection I had to prevent it." He shrugged. "Unfortunately I fell into your little trap. I thought you really suspected Julius."

A plainclothes man appeared in the door. "The wagon's here, Inspector."

"Take him away," said Bradley.

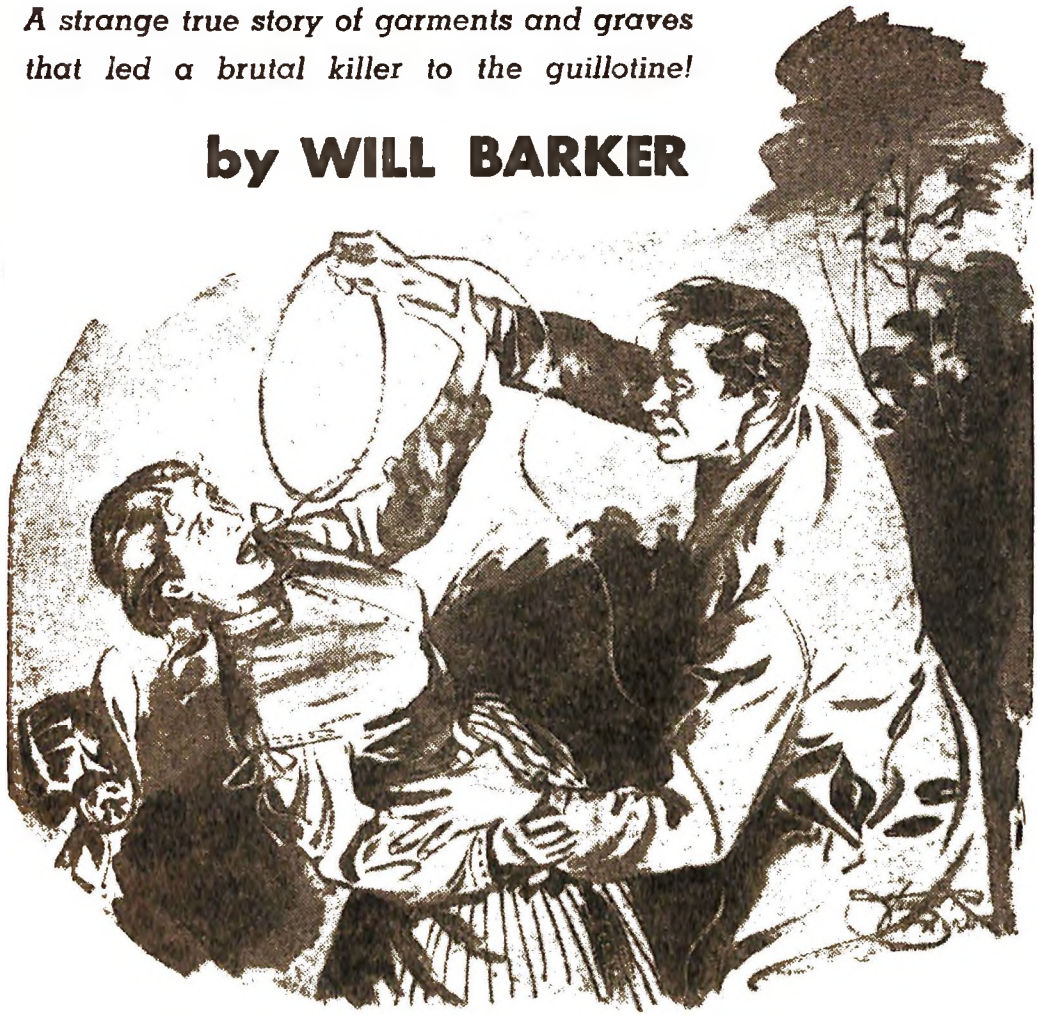
Ellen spoke in a practical voice. "You're going home now, Larry. You're going to bed and stay there. For once you'll do as you're told."

Larry looked at Bradley. "You got me into this—you and your murder," he wailed. "Good-by, freedom! Good-by—Lawrence Storm!"

"Mercy," said Bradley, "what a loss!"

A strange true story of garments and graves that led a brutal killer to the guillotine!

by WILL BARKER



the WARDROBE of *Madame Dumollard*

EARLY in the Nineteenth Century, the two white houses near Montluel, France, were known as "the Great and Little Dangers." Those names were singularly apt! Many a traveler riding through the densely-wooded area around those houses had been set upon, robbed and often killed by the gangs who lived in "the Great and Little Dangers." But the thieves and murderers were finally brought to justice, and the country soon became one much favored by hunters. The only shots to echo through the woods and fields were the ones which bagged game.

On February 8, 1855, however, the

Montluel area again became the scene of violent death!

A party of hunters from Lyons, twelve miles distant, was pushing its way through a thicket. The man in the lead suddenly halted. At his feet was the body of a young girl. She had been killed by six horrible head and face wounds. And her nude body was mutilated. Nearby, the horrified hunters found a handkerchief, a black lace cap and a pair of shoes. These they immediately turned over to the police.

The gendarmerie learned that these pitiful wardrobe accessories were those of Marie Boday, a servant girl from Lyons. In that city, the police located the woman with whom she had boarded. Marie's landlady said that her pretty young boarder had been offered a good job in the country, and that in order to get it, she had had to leave at once. This she had done, and in so doing, sealed her death warrant. The tragedy revived all the old superstitions that the Montluel area was an evil place.

Police Are Apathetic

The police, however, were strangely apathetic about tracking down Marie's murderer. Apparently, they decided that Marie was no better than she should have been, and had been done in by her paramour. When there was no further violence in the sinister Montluel woods, nothing further was done to catch the murderer of the servant girl.

It wasn't until over six years later, at midnight on May 26, 1861, that the vicinity of "the Great and Little Dangers" received its second shock, one that was a tocsin which sounded a warning to the sluggish police that there was a murderer in the neighborhood.

That night, hysterical rapping on a farmer's door roused a peasant and his family. The sleepy man opened the door, to find a half-crazed young woman standing before him. Her face and neck were scratched, her clothes were torn, and she was shoeless. The farmer, the first one to show some sense in the area, immediately took the strange girl to the brigade of gendarmerie at Montluel. She identified herself as Marie Pichon, a servant girl from Lyons, and in a voice hoarse from fright, told the following story.

Marie was crossing the La Guillotiere bridge at Lyons on the way to look for work. She had reached the far side of the bridge when a man stopped and questioned her as to the location of the Servants Office.

"Why," she said, "I'm going there myself, and will show you the way."

The stranger, who had an odd-looking upper lip, had the appearance of a countryman. He asked her if she was looking for work. Marie admitted that she was, and the man then offered her a position. He explained that he was a gardener on a big estate near Montleul, and that his mistress had sent him to Lyons for a house-servant. Such were the inducements that he then offered that Marie agreed to go with him at once.

They went to Marie's lodgings to get her trunk, after which they proceeded to the station, where they got a train for Montluel, arriving at that sinister spot after dark. The gardener explained to Marie that since it was quite a walk to the chateau by the main road, they would take a short-cut through the woods. Then, without another word, he swung her trunk up on his shoulder, and set off. There was nothing for her to do, but follow.

Marie and the gardener had only gone a short distance when he stopped, saying:

"Your trunk's too heavy. I'll hide it in the bushes, and come back for it tomorrow with a wagon."

Once the trunk was hidden, Marie's companion began to act queerly. First, he tried to uproot a small tree. Next he stooped down, and began to pick up some small stones. His odd actions in the dark woods alarmed her. She asked him what he was looking for. He shrugged, saying nothing, but soon repeated his search for stones. Again she asked him what he was trying to do. He said:

"Looking for plants for my garden."

Girl Becomes Alarmed

At his answer, Marie experienced real fright. No one but a madman, she felt, would try and find plants at night. She decided that as soon as she could she would make a break. That opportunity came as they reached the summit of a small hill. At the bottom was a good road—a road, she decided, breaking into a run, that might lead to possible safety.

But the trusting little servant girl from Lyons never took more than a few steps!

Muscled arms grabbed her. A running noose was partially dropped over her head. With that horrid cord caught on her little bonnet, Marie started to fight, and fought with the strength that comes from the will to live. She pushed the man's arms up, and away. The noose pulled off her little hat, and she's was unexpectedly free. And then she ran—ran as if the very devil was after her—as in truth he was—until she reached the farmer, who took her to the police.

Marie's story did what the finding of the Boday girl's body hadn't. It roused the authorities. They began a local inquiry, questioning all inhabitants in the surrounding country. The interrogation brought to light the fact that a house in the small town of Dumollard was occupied by people most peculiar, whose name was the same as that of the town in which they lived.

Neighbors said that the man worked nights, and had been heard to give his rough-looking wife the password of "Hardi" when he knocked at the door. And when it was learned that Dumollard had an odd scar on his upper lip, the police were definitely interested. Marie had told them that her assailant had a peculiar-looking upper lip.

The town magistrates went at once to the Dumollard home. They queried him regarding his movements on the night of May 28th. Since his answers were evasive, he was taken to Trevoux, and immediately identified by Marie Pichon as the man who had brought her from Lyons.

While Dumollard was in Trevoux, the local police searched the house under the menacing eyes of Madame Dumoullard, a silent woman of mannish appearance. They found clothes of all descriptions and sizes, some bearing traces of blood, others recently washed, but also showing bloodstains.

When Marianne Dumollard was questioned she admitted that one of the bloodstained garments belonged to a girl buried in the nearby Montmain woods. She went on to explain that her husband had helped two men bury this girl. The police didn't question her further. They had Dumollard brought back from Trevoux, and with his wife, took him into the woods. Once there, they asked him to point out the grave of the girl he helped to bury.

Find Girl's Skeleton

Dumollard was uncertain about its location, pointing out first one spot, then another. Finally, someone noted a roughed up spot in the terrain. They started digging, and soon uncovered a woman's skeleton.

The sight of it unnerved Dumollard's wife. She said that there were other graves in the woods. So again they searched. This time the body that they discovered was in a state of complete preservation, due to the character of the earth. That was startling enough! But what was really horrible was that it looked as if the woman had been buried alive. She was clutching a clod of earth in one hand.

The searching party, horrified, turned to look at Dumollard. He stood, glancing off over the countryside, apparently unmoved. They noticed, however, that when he did shift his gaze, he never looked at the dead girl's face. The police felt that they had their man, and told him it was useless to deny that he was the girl's killer.

Dumollard took a deep breath, and then told the wildest story ever concocted by a murderer.

Dumollard, whose father had met death by being drawn and quartered for his part in a plot against the life of the Emperor of Austria, said that he was only the tool of two men who exerted an influence over him. They had, he went on, ordered him to abduct young women for them, offering forty francs for every one he got, and a bonus of a hundred thousand francs if he worked for them for twenty years.

The first girl that Dumollard abducted for them was in December, 1853. He claimed that he turned her over to his two sinister employers at Neyron, where he waited for them to return after they left him with the girl. Upon their return, several hours later, they gave him a blood-stained gown and chemise, saying,

"You will not see her again!"

Dumollard washed the clothes, and upon returning home gave them to his wife. These two garments were the start of Madame Dumollard's horrible wardrobe, which, when brought into court,

numbered the following articles: Six dozen handkerchiefs; five dozen pairs of stockings; twenty-seven scarves, forty caps, a dozen corsets, nine gowns, and quantities of other wearing apparel.

During his gruesome recital, in which Dumollard constantly repeated that he was in the employ of these two men, subsequent murders tallied up as follows:

1. Three unknown women, murdered, and thrown into the Rhone River.
2. Murder of Marie Boday, the girl whose body was found by the hunting party.
3. Murder of an unknown girl, whose skeleton was found in the Montmain Woods.
4. Murder of the buried-alive woman, who was later identified as Marie Bussod.
5. Attempted robbery and assassination of ten other young women.

This probably doesn't half cover the list of Dumollard's victims. His wife, hinted at others, and among the clothes, were those which would have fit half-grown children.

Of course no one believed Dumollard's weird story, that he was the victim of the two evil men with hypnotic powers. His trial started on the 29th of January, 1862, at Assizes of the Ain. Marianne Dumollard was also put on trial.

Spruces Up For Trial

Dumollard, seated a short distance from his wife, looked like a fairly prosperous farmer. His hair and beard were luxuriant and black; his eyes blue and prominent. And the lump on his upper lip, which had really trapped him, was quite noticeable. He was extremely calm and self-possessed, even complaining that there was a draft which bothered him.

After a window had been closed, the trial proceeded in an orderly manner, and lasted four days.

When questioned about his attack on Marie Pichon—whose account he agreed with—Dumollard said his attempt to strangle her was to scare her so that she would run away before he delivered her to his two employers!

His outrageous, bold and impudent statement left the court gasping, and it adjourned for a few minutes. During the interval of adjournment, Dumollard took out a huge bread and cheese sandwich from his pocket. He ate it with apparent zest. And while eating, he caught sight of Marie Pichon. The people in the court were dumbfounded to hear him cry out:

"Ah, unhappy one! But for me you would not be here now! Come and thank me for rescuing you from those villains."

Dumollard was still sticking to his story that he was under the hypnotic influence of his two malign employers.

It did him no good, however!

The fifty-third witness, Josephette Bussod, sister of the murdered Marie, positively identified Dumollard as the man whom her sister had gone away with. At the end of the trial, Madame Dumollard was sentenced to twenty years at hard labor, and Dumollard was sentenced to be guillotined at Montluel.

The guillotine was ready for Dumollard at Montluel when he was brought back to the country in which he had committed so many murders. On March 7th, 1863, he got out at the Town Hall, and went into the council chamber, where he warmed himself in front of the fire. One of the magistrates, who was present, asked him if he would like to say anything.

Dumollard answered, "I am innocent. It is unlucky, but I am sacrificed for the crimes of others." He added shortly, "If others have buried bodies in my vineyard, I am not responsible for that!"

Then, in a few minutes, Dumollard was prepared for his execution. Once again, those in the council chamber tried to get him to admit his guilt. He remained silent, still playing the role of a victim of circumstances. His questioners gave up and Dumollard was marched to his fate, a more merciful death than he had given those poor servant girls from Lyons.

Dumollard's body was buried in the Montluel cemetery, not far from where "the Little and Great Dangers" still gleam whitely in the sunshine. But now the countryside is safe from both those early murders, and the one whose killings made Madame Dumollard's macabre wardrobe possible.

●

Max dragged Kurt's body over to the hole and dumped it in

BEWARE the Fat Fox

By WILLIAM R. HONEST

A RED blur where the sun was promised glowed over the Beechwood junction as Max Baylor stepped off the train. A long-bodied man with pole-thin legs and a face with bitter lines, he watched the farmers sweating between milk trucks and silvery tank cars and wondered if Kurt Stringer would really show up.

The long stiffening ride to Vermont was supposed to be crowned by Kurt's appearance with the money. Three years in prison had sharpened an old envy but failed to rid Max of an underlying fear and distrust of him. He had always thought of Kurt as a sly, fat fox, always had resented his superior pose. Max had undertaken this journey not merely to recover his money but with the obsession of proving to himself that he was

Baylor Returns from Prison—with Money on His Mind!

not Kurt's fool. But his ego demanded something more than Kurt's life.

A dust-gray Dodge convertible swung into the junction and a stout figure, moving with slow, summery discomfort, got out. Max tensed as he recognized Kurt's wide, slightly hunched shoulders. He saw the shadowy smile on Kurt's lips, but did not smile back. The two men shook hands coldly.

Kurt said, "Get in, Max."

"Where are you taking me?"

"It's a little surprise. You'll see."

Max thought: "You better have my dough; that's all the surprise I want."

Kurt drove the car back onto the highway. Max, still tensed, remembered how he had dreamed of getting his hands on him when it looked like Kurt had abandoned him after the trial. If Kurt had not unexpectedly visited Max in prison a short time before release, Max had felt ready to risk a longer sentence by stooling. It would have been worth it to have so many cops hunting the fat fox.

Now, as the car gained speed, Max had a wild impulse to stop, to get out before it was too late. It was suddenly and frighteningly plausible that Kurt intended to cut the one living link connecting him with the robbery that sent Max to jail. Max glanced at the speedometer. It registered fifty-five. The road was empty before them, night lamps still burning, blending vaguely with the grayish, spreading light. His eyes moved from the hairy hands on the wheel to Kurt's fleshy face where a smile wavered on thick lips.

Kurt said without turning: "You didn't expect me to be waiting. Isn't that the truth?"

MAX stuck a finger under his collar. His neck was wet. He heard the hoarse voice continuing: "I've done better than just sit on your dough."

"How d'you mean?"

"Look, Max. There it is."

The car slowed beside a roadside shop with a faded sign: BEECHWOOD AUTO REPAIRS. Adjoining was a vast junkyard filled with astounding piles of wheels, tires, rain-corroded bodies, fenders and motors. Kurt grinned and got out. "It's all yours, Max," he said.

Max looked inside the shop, his panic banked by curiosity about the welding instruments, gas tanks, anvils, hammers and the rest.

Kurt came in yawning. "There's a house in the back, nothing fancy."

"The dough?" Max said.

Kurt knelt at a pile of battered fenders. Max was watching cautiously as his friend groaned and straightened with a tool box. "It's here," said Kurt opening the lid. "Small denominations, nothing to worry about."

"How much?" Max asked with rising excitement.

"Thirty-four thousand. This place took six grand."

Max felt the stacks of currency with his fingers. "You took me serious, all right!"

"When I saw you in prison, didn't you say you'd like some quiet business for awhile?"

"Till I got used to the outside."

"Well, you said you learned auto-repairing in prison, that's why I picked this place."

Max closed the money-crammed toolbox. "Let's have a look at that house."

Kurt followed, breathing wheezily as they walked up the wooden porch stairs in front. They were met by a wall of heat and dust-piled interior, unappealing even to eyes accustomed to prison.

"How am I supposed to pay for this hole?" questioned Max. "People don't pop out of jail and buy property."

"I'll send you a receipt every month as if you're paying it out."

Max looked at him. "What're your plans?"

Kurt shrugged. "Oh, guess I'll be pushing along."

"No rush," Max said, and managed to keep it cool.

"As long as you make me welcome," said Kurt wryly, "I'll take that downstairs bedroom. I don't like walking stairs."

Max left him to investigate the floor above. There was another bedroom facing front. He thought Kurt ought to have had the place fumigated and cleaned, then he wondered why Kurt should have become so kind in the first place? He opened the tool box again and felt full of power as he stared at the money. He wasn't going to leave it in this fire-trap. He looked around and found some old wrapping paper in the closet and made a package of the box. When he came downstairs he found Kurt had fallen asleep on his bed. Max, hesitating at the doorway, had an uneasy

moment—then, frowning, he went outside where it was cooler and surveyed his new premises.

He invested a couple of hours in clearing and cleaning the shop. A station-wagon stopped and a man dragged in some oxygen and hydrogen tanks. As Max signed for them, he asked in a neighborly way, "Just took over, eh?" He borrowed a cigarette and told Max all about Beechwood.

When he left, Max woke up Kurt who grouchily surrendered his car keys and fell asleep again. Kurt drove the Dodge into town. As the man had said, it was a big center, with several sizable factories, the quarries and a paper mill. Max stopped at the bank.

It was housed in a wooden mansion, but as he'd hoped, there was a basement vault. He rented a safety box and after extracting one thousand dollars, left the tool box. The rural informality of the bank reminded him forcibly of his past life.

He had once been night watchman in a bank. A medium town like this. Kurt Stringer had rigged a story for him. It went something like this: "Your honor —I'm just a bank watchman and I did my best. This gang broke in somehow, shoved a gun into my ribs and forced me to disconnect the alarm system. They left me tied up the way I was found."

Kurt had assured Max that any jury would swallow that with one chew if he played his part properly as an idiot, a frightened idiot. After the robbery, however, the jury recommended punishment in view of the obvious delinquency of duty. The cops had never been able to trace either the money or the "gang." Kurt had promised Max that his share would be waiting. Yes—thought Max bitterly—it waited: I went to the workhouse for three years while that fat fox was free!

LATER Max drove back from Beechwood with the car loaded with supplies. Kurt was just getting up. He came into the kitchen, his clothes hanging like month-old pajamas.

"I ordered some gas tanks," Kurt said between yawns.

"They came."

Max watched the greedy way Kurt ate. He hoped Kurt wouldn't decide to take off before he could find some way to pay off for that workhouse hitch. He wanted to tell him, "You're not as smart as you think. I'm going to hand you a thousand nights on a prison cot like I had, only I'm going to dish it out in one shot."

That night, Max went upstairs, felt the dead sagging springs of the old bed, and his dream of a better place to sleep than a prison cot, faded. The house was so dilapidated that the faintest breeze found something loose to rattle. The heat didn't help. He got up restively, lit a cigarette and looked out the window into darkness. It was sometime after midnight when he imagined he heard the front door creaking.

He raced downstairs in time to see the Dodge moving out into the highway. "So he's gone!" Max lit another cigarette and paced around. He took off his pajamas and dressed. The little porch out front promised to be cooler. He sat down, convinced there was no understanding a mind like Kurt's. There were a dozen cigarette butts lying around the legs of the chair by the time he was aroused by tires scraping over the rock-strewn driveway.

Max withdrew into the house. Kurt stumbled in, failed to notice Max in the darkness and went into his room. Max followed and pulled the light string. Kurt's eyes showed puffy and haggard in the glare. "What're you up for?" he drawled peevishly.

"Where've you been?"

Kurt dropped heavily on the bed. "Go way, lemme sleep."

"You pulled some job!"

Kurt peeped contemptuously through half-closed eyes. "You're screwy with the heat. Go to bed."

Max felt all wound up inside. He went out to the Dodge, pulled open the door and got in. There was nothing to see out of the ordinary inside. He slid out and went around to the tail-light. The trunk-compartment was locked. He went into the shop for some tools, then set them down, afraid of awakening Kurt. He stood by the house door smoking and listening for Kurt's snoring. Then he stepped on the cigarette. The ceiling light was still on and Kurt snored. Max's fingers touched lightly down the rumpled trouser leg, located the keys in the pocket. He couldn't see how to get them without disturbing Kurt. He tiptoed to the bathroom and got a razor blade.

Max was angry with himself because

fear stiffened his fingers as he slit Kurt's trousers where the keys were outlined. He felt the sweat beading his forehead as he extricated the keys and gently pulled the light-string. Kurt's snoring behind him was reassuring.

He fitted the key into the trunk-lock back of the Dodge and raised the lid. There was a small leather valise. The lid almost slammed down. He lowered it and rushed into the shop. The valise contained one hundred and twenty thousand dollars.

Max felt the heat pressing his temples. To reap a great gain without involvement—that had been Kurt's code. Max was playing no more sap parts: he would simply disappear with the money.

The idea dazzled for an instant, then he thought of all the cops being briefed on Max Baylor—details in full from prison records. Kurt would throw suspicion his way, that was certain; especially if the job were traced to Kurt. He had waited long. Now he was sure that this was the moment for the kill! In time he could go anywhere with a free conscience.

He picked up a hammer and turned.

Kurt was standing at the doorway, a listless expression on his fleshy face, snub-nosed automatic in his palm.

"The valise, Max, if you please."

Max dropped it, kicked it across the floor. It landed about two feet from Kurt, who bowed warily to pick it up.

"Max, is that a hammer in your hand?"

Max dropped it. The noise was sharp in the night silence.

Kurt scowled. "You're a skinny, jealous punk, Max. You just got out of trouble. Why can't you keep your nose clean?"

"Was it the Beechwood Bank?" asked Max, his voice dry and low.

KURT'S lips didn't seem to move. He looked tired, his eyes straining alertly. The lips whispered: "A job just like ours."

"You mean you bamboozled another watchman!"

"I'm strictly honest with my partners." Kurt laughed wearily. "Didn't I turn over your dough to the penny?" He started toward Max.

"How'd you ever get around this sucker?" Max was smiling, but felt sweat crawling down his back.

Kurt came nearer. "Oh," he said with cynical pleasantness, "the watchman has a very sick daughter. It took time, of course."

"With all those quarries and factories you picked a good bank, all right." Max was watching Kurt's eyes, not the automatic.

Kurt stopped. "My car keys, please." The valise was in his left hand, the other, with the automatic, stretched for the keys. Max swallowed and held out the keys. Kurt had to turn open his palm to receive them. Max, all taut, threw himself against Kurt's middle, curled against him, holding the pistol hand away. He twisted it violently, heard Kurt's groan and the sound of the automatic hitting the board floor. He threw Kurt down and snatched the weapon.

Kurt just sat. "You stupid fool," he said clinging to the valise. "If I had wanted to shoot you, I could have done it right away."

"Why didn't you?"

Kurt's expression was d o l e f u l. "You've been in stir so long you can't trust your own shadow. I didn't have to wait all these years with your dough, either."

"You're breaking my heart." Max put out a hand and motioned for the valise.

Kurt shook his head. "I've been square with you, Max. I'll split it with you."

Max thought a second about a workhouse dream in which he outwitted the fox: the dream of a thousand brooding nights. He squeezed the trigger. Every piece of tin and iron in the shop seemed to scream an echo.

Max pulled away the valise and slipped the automatic into it. He bunked it under the porch steps. He went on into Kurt's room and removed every trace of occupancy. He went back to the shop and stared at the body. In the stillness now his mind seemed to race.

He picked up a lantern, a shovel and a chisel. Under a thin slice of moon the junkyard was a graveyard of chassis, fenders, motors and doors. He tripped over an old tire and cursed. He lit the lantern with a safety match and began to clear away a pile of the metal debris. Then he broke ground with the chisel. The soil was hard, full of rock. He wondered how Vermont farmers ever planted anything. Nervous energy enabled him to shovel deeply.

He returned for Kurt's body, dragged it to the fresh hole and dumped it in. He got the license plate off Kurt's car and threw that in, too. Then he shoveled back the earth, stamped it down and distributed the extra earth around the yard. He pushed back a pile of rusting metal to cover it. The hard job was next.

He figured the time to be about three. That gave him another two hours before sun-up. He hoped it could be done as he thought. He was going to dismantle Kurt's Dodge, hide its parts with the hundreds of automobile parts littering the yard. He had thought first of burning the body in the car, make it look like an accident. Then he was struck by this way to make Kurt and his convertible cease to exist. He felt even Kurt would have admired the idea. That watchman would be sure Kurt had tricked him. He'd wait and wait to hear from Kurt, and then he'd spill everything. And Max would have all that dough.

He put the tools into the Dodge and drove it into the yard. His eyes watched the east. Piece by piece he stripped down the car as much as he could. He flung the parts amongst uncountable masses of junk. Drenched with sweat he saw the East finally flood red-and-orange. He finished up and went into the house. Sleep came quickly.

THE horn honking out front was insistent. Max unpasted his eyelids. He got off the bed and sneaked a look through the window. He saw the rear end of a car beyond the shop. He straightened his clothes and went downstairs counseling himself to be cool.

"You run this she-bang?" A tall, gaunt-faced man slipped out of an old Buick. He wore cocoa tan pants of mountain cloth, but a regular jacket.

"I'm Max Baylor. What can I do for you?"

"You could iron these pants, maybe." The man rapped the dented fender with a freckled knuckle. "How long would that take?"

Max felt like discouraging business but he was afraid to. "Not too long."

"I'll wait."

Dismantling Kurt's car had sapped Max's stamina. The job seemed to stretch out. Max felt discomfited. Why hadn't this skinflint asked the price first? Sweat dripped down over his fingers as he hammered. The noise filled his ears so he didn't hear the cars coming.

Several men stepped out and talked to Max's customer. The gaunt-faced man came back and looked for something in his car. He strapped on a holster. He pulled the revolver calmly as he said:

"Max Baylor, you're under arrest."

The shock and the tiredness of his body made Max shiver. "I—I don't get it?" he said trying to control himself.

"I'm Orville Emerson." He took out a sheriff's badge and pinned it back on his lapel.

Max was thinking feverishly: "They've got to pin that Beechwood job on somebody — they've picked out a stranger in town."

"I had a look around while you were sleeping, Mr. Baylor," said the sheriff. "You're the only one around. While I kept you busy, these men have been getting a line on you."

Max forced a smile as if both knew it was a bluff.

Emerson went on: "The Beechwood Bank was robbed during the night. The job was done with the use of hydrogen and oxygen torch. We found discarded tanks on the road outside town. You're an ex-convict, Mr. Baylor. You did time for exactly the same sort of job, and being a former bank watchman yourself, I suppose you knew all about alarm systems. You signed for those same tanks only yesterday. Is that enough?"

Max put a finger under his collar; it felt wet.

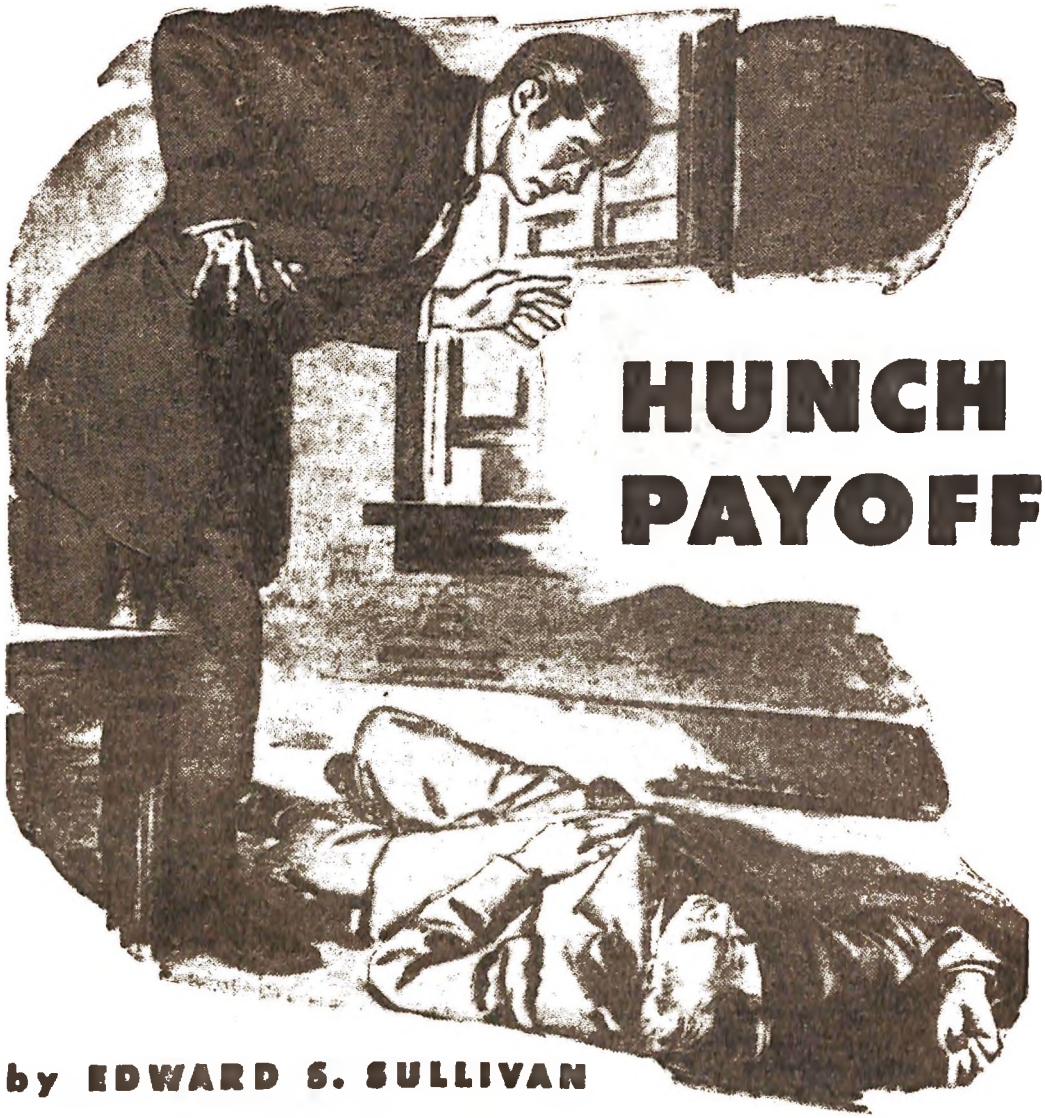
The sheriff continued: "The watchman's wife tells me he's been very uneasy and worried the past few days. He almost didn't go in to work last night. Maybe you had him in on this—it looks like it."

Max demanded: "You ask that watchman then?" But a crackle of laughter cut him off.

"We can't ask him," snapped the sheriff, "because that's why you murdered him! Anyway, we were warned about you. Mr. Kurt Stringer, a business agent of some sort, bought this here property. He came in and told us that he might be selling it to a guy getting out of prison. Thought we ought to keep an eye on you awhile. Too durn bad we didn't check on you sooner."

Max felt a choking sensation. So

(Concluded on page 65)



HUNCH PAYOFF

by EDWARD S. SULLIVAN

Can intuition solve a crime? Here are two true cases that say—yes!

IN detective fiction of the gas-light era, the master-sleuth often solved his cases by pure hunches—flashes of inspiration that led him straight to the heart of the mystery.

The modern hard-boiled school discounts this sort of thing, insisting that detective-work, to be "realistic," must proceed in a more earth-bound way, must be nine-tenths perspiration.

The latest findings of psychologists, however, indicate that the old-fashioned reliance on hunches and intuitions may not have been so far off the beam, after all.

Since the original discoveries of Dr. Sigmund Freud revolutionized mental science, researchers have learned more and more about the unconscious workings of the human mind. It appears that

we all do a lot of observing and thinking and calculating of which we are totally unconscious, and which far exceeds our conscious activities.

In this light, such things as hunches, intuitions, flashes of inspiration, are removed from the realm of the mysterious or supernatural, and explained simply on the basis of our unconscious mind working over a mass of material and bringing the result—not the process—suddenly to consciousness.

Such deep, non-verbal mental activity is usually more accurate than conscious thinking, since the unconscious, which is the store-house of memory, naturally doesn't forget things.

Whether or not we are aware of the psychological explanation, nearly all of us habitually make use of hunches and intuitions, perhaps more than we realize.

Hunches Often Are Right

A doctor, for instance, may take one look at a patient whom he has never seen before, and diagnose his trouble accurately, without being able to explain how he does it. From his experience of hundreds of similar cases, he has learned unconsciously to note subtle little indications in the patient's attitude and manner; his unconscious mind clicks like an adding-machine and shoots the result to the surface.

Most experienced detectives will readily agree with modern psychology's vindication of the old-fashioned hunch.

Despite the hard-boiled fictional school to the contrary, nearly any old-time policeman can tell you of a number of cases he has cracked by pure and apparently baseless intuition, without any conscious reasoning process at all.

There are two prime examples of this, in the files of the San Francisco Police Department.

In 1883, a wealthy old man, Nicholas Skerrett, disappeared from his home in San Francisco. His friends received telegrams informing them he had sold all his property to a young attorney, Wright LeRoy, and was going back East for good.

Suspicious circumstances led to an investigation, and Skerrett's corpse was found in a vacant house which he owned. He had been strangled to death. His pockets had been rifled.

LeRoy was arrested as the obvious suspect. He denied any part in the murder. He said he had heard two ex-convicts, acquaintances of his, discussing a plot to kidnap and rob Skerrett, but hadn't taken them seriously.

Police found that the ex-convicts had vanished from their usual haunts. They concentrated on the search for them, and were on the point of releasing LeRoy, in the absence of evidence against him.

Detective Robert Hogan, however, was convinced of LeRoy's guilt, and persuaded Captain Isaiah Lees to hold him as long as possible, while he continued his investigation.

A routine search of LeRoy's rooms had disclosed nothing incriminating.

Going over LeRoy's belongings at the jail, Hogan noted a large ring of keys. Methodically, he took them along and tried them in all the doors of LeRoy's rooms and offices, and on his trunks and other locks, until all were accounted for except one, a shiny new brass key. LeRoy said he didn't recognize this key—that it must be for some unimportant thing which he had forgotten.

This little loose-end stuck in the back of Hogan's mind. He tried the key in the doors of other rooms near LeRoy's—not knowing exactly what he was looking for—without any luck.

One night, Hogan was walking down Market Street with Captain Lees. The captain suddenly remembered that he had to see someone at the Grand Hotel, and asked Hogan to wait outside for a few minutes.

Hogan, who disliked inactivity, stamped impatiently up and down, toying with LeRoy's key-ring in his pocket.

As he walked back and forth, his eyes kept coming back to the dark, somehow sinister-looking doorway of a cheap lodging house up the street.

He walked past the door several times, peered in at the ill-lighted, rickety stairway through the dusty glass.

Then, on impulse, he tried the shiny key in the door. The door opened.

Detectives Search Room

When Captain Lees returned, they entered the rooming house. The sullen proprietor showed them to a room he had rented some weeks before to a young man fitting LeRoy's description, who

had paid a month in advance.

The room was LeRoy's. Under the mattress, they found Nicholas Skerrett's wallet, watch, and jewelry. Piled in the closet were a dozen cans of chloride of lime, which LeRoy had apparently planned to use to dispose of Skerrett's body, if it had not been discovered prematurely.

In a notebook in the room, which clearly was LeRoy's murder headquarters, they found the current addresses of the two ex-convicts they were seeking.

Arrested, the two men said the attorney had tried to get them to help him in the murder, but they had refused.

Wright LeRoy was swiftly convicted and hanged.

Asked how he had come to try the key in the door of that particular lodginghouse, out of all the doors in the big city, Detective Hogan shrugged.

"I don't know," he said. "It just looked sort of suspicious to me!"

On a spring morning in 1923, Inspector Fred Bohr of the Hotel Detail dropped into the Manx Hotel on Powell Street, on his usual routine round of the big hotels.

While he was idly scanning the register, he happened to glance up and notice two well-dressed young men who were standing at the cigar-counter, joking with the clerk. They fairly oozed prosperity. Their clothes were new, of the latest cut, and one of them sported a big diamond pin in his bright red necktie. After staring at them for a moment, he casually asked the desk-clerk who they were.

"Why, let's see—one of them is registered as Richard Riley, from New York, and the other is George Conley, from Denver. Conley's wife is with them. They look like nice fellows. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just wondering who they were."

"They're okay," the clerk assured him. "Quiet people, plenty of money. Been here a couple of days. Double suite, twenty-five dollars a day. That's their big Packard, standing right across the street there."

His routine business completed, Bohr left the hotel and strolled idly down the street. He stopped at the corner, frowned, crossed to the other side and walked back. As he passed the big Packard touring-car, he casually noted its license number. He stopped at the nearest telephone booth, called the State Motor Vehicle Division, and learned that the Packard was registered to M. Riley, Hotel St. Francis.

There was nothing suspicious about this. M. Riley was probably a relative of Richard Riley, and the New Yorker had borrowed the car. But Bohr was a tenacious and methodical man, and since he had started checking on the two strangers, he intended to finish the job.

He walked up the street to the St. Francis, still more annoyed than anything else, at the bee in his bonnet that had moved him to take on this extra and apparently futile chore.

Strangers In Town

But his attention sharpened when he found that no one named M. Riley was registered or known at the St. Francis, nor had been for a year past.

He headed back to the Manx. The Packard was no longer parked there, and the clerk said the three guests had gone out.

Bohr shrugged and started again on his rounds. Three blocks away, parked in front of a restaurant, he spotted the Packard. A newsboy told him the occupants, two men and a woman, had gone into the restaurant.

Bohr waited by the car, and when the trio came back he accosted them, showed them his badge, and informed them politely that they were parked overtime.

"We're strangers in town," Conley explained. "My wife and I are from Denver, and Dick here is from New York. Sorry. It won't happen again. Have a cigar, officer?"

Bohr declined the cigar. He explained that it was his duty to give them a ticket, but that, being strangers, they could avoid a fine if they would come with him to the Traffic Bureau and pick up a little booklet of rules. They readily agreed, and all piled into the Packard, Conley, the one with the red tie, taking the wheel.

"Your car?" the inspector asked idly.

"No," Conley told him. "It belongs to a friend of mine."

At the Hall of Justice Bohr, who had been covertly sizing up the trio, led them to the Bureau of Inspectors.

"Say, this doesn't look like the Traffic

Bureau!" Conley protested.

"That's right, it isn't," Bohr assented pleasantly. "You see, there are a few questions I want to ask you. For one thing, how is it that the car you're driving is registered to M. Riley of the Hotel St. Francis, when they don't know anybody by that name there?"

Conley turned suddenly defiant.

"Ask him," he snarled, jerking his head at Riley.

"I don't know anything about it," Riley declared. "There are a lot of people named Riley."

Questions as to their occupations and their business in San Francisco brought similar unsatisfactory answers. Mrs. Conley broke down in tears. Riley and Conley were clearly on the defensive, and frightened.

Leaving Riley and Mrs. Conley in custody of other detectives, Bohr and two other officers drove George Conley back to the Manx, where they got his key from the startled clerk and went up to the suite with him.

Four suitcases, locked and strapped, stood in a corner. Bohr asked Conley to open them.

"I can't. Riley has the keys."

Bohr quickly opened one of the cases with a skeleton key. Unstrapped, it sprang open, and out tumbled roll upon roll of—postage stamps!

There were about two thousand dollars worth of stamps, in sheets and rolls, in the single suitcase.

"Nothing wrong with carrying stamps around, is there?" Conley wanted to know. "We're planning to start a vending-machine company."

As Bohr bent over the second suitcase, the telephone rang. It was a man asking for Conley. One of the officers stalled him, while Bohr ran to another phone and traced the call. It came from a public booth nearby. Bohr ran to the booth and found a frightened young man still at the phone.

The youth clutched a briefcase, in which were more stamps.

"I got them from Conley," he explained. "I met him in a saloon, and he asked me to help him sell them."

Altogether, Bohr and his men collected some $5,000 in brand-new stamps.

Riley and Conley refused to talk. But postal inspectors quickly identified the sheets and rolls as loot from the $28,000 robbery of the main post office at Olympia, Washington, two weeks previously.

Two men fitting the descriptions of Riley and Conley had entered the office late at night, tied up the watchman, blasted their way into the vault and strong-box, and escaped with $28,000 in stamps. As they fled, they cut the telephone wires leading out of Olympia.

Inspectors traced the movements of the pair in Washington, found that they had shipped two trunks from Tacoma to San Francisco. Bohr located the trunks and found the rest of the $28,000 loot, together with an assortment of burglar tools.

Riley and Conley were taken to Olympia for trial. Mrs. Conley, who had had no part in the robbery, was released.

Convicted, they were sentenced to thirty-year terms in Leavenworth.

Pressed by his brother officers as to what had made him suspicious of Riley and Conley, Inspector Bohr opined:

"I didn't like the color of that fellow's necktie. It was—well—it didn't look just right."

BEWARE THE FAT FOX

(Concluded from page 61)

that's why Kurt seemed so kind, that's why he hadn't pulled the trigger on Max when he had the chance—because he had Max measured to take the rap for this job! Kurt had become even foxier, he had killed the watchman to cover his trail. He had wanted no more live partners.

Max began to back away, but some of the men had strolled around the car and were standing behind him. He broke out heatedly:

"This is crazy! Kurt Stringer—" but the words died in his throat. He was going to demand that if they found Kurt, he'd expose him, force him to clear him. But Kurt was under the earth beneath the junk. Anything that brought attention to Kurt's disappearance was equally fatal.

Max couldn't stop the shaking of his bony legs. He sank to his knees and beat the ground. "The fat fox!" he cried. "The fat fox!"

A South African town is turned into a hotbed of terror when a corpse walks backward to doom!

THE STRAW MEN

a Macabre Crime Novel

I

ON the morning which was to witness the beginning of those sinister events that pulled the pleasant South African town of Marathon down into the nightmare world where the Straw Men walked, Peter Blake and his fiancée, Ann Dixon, a pretty girl with dark chestnut hair, were strolling in the deserted main street. "Deserted" was literally correct; for this was Sunday, and the next day was one of Marathon's four public holidays, a fact which was to have a vital bearing on the murders. Now only a few cars rested dustily in the centre parking clustered outside the only two buildings where work was

Johnson lay at the foot of the pole, with one arm embracing it (Chap. III)

MURDERS

by ALEXANDER CAMPBELL

being done—the post office and the police station.

"I've got to run in to see Miriam," said Ann. "Coming?"

Peter Blake shook his head. "Not for me," he said decidedly. "So far we've called on five of your female friends, and I've consumed seven cups of tea. Any more tannin would be disastrous for my system." He glanced at his watch. "Does Maxwell Johnson drink tea?" he asked anxiously.

Ann laughed. "I should imagine beer would be more in his line. You're going to see his old mumbo-jumbo this morning?"

Grim Spectres of Vengeful Witch Doctors Lead

"Not mumbo-jumbo, darling," Peter corrected her gently. "He is a distinguished anthropologist. He asked me especially to come over before the gang arrived after lunch—us, and your father, and the Hattinghs. I've to see the collection; but he's reserving the other thiggummy for the gang—the Evil House." They stopped before a brightly painted door leading to a tiny flat over a row of shops. "Look here, while you're exchanging tea and scandal with Miriam, I'll pop in and see Quayle."

Ann nodded. "All right. If you get locked up, I'll bail you out. 'By."

She opened the bright door and tripped up the microscopic staircase thus revealed. Peter crossed the white glaring bar of dusty road to where the post office and police station stood.

Inspector Jeremy Quayle, the top policeman in Marathon, looked like a tonsured monk. He was very tall, with a long, thin, ascetic face and was bald save for a gray fringe round the ears.

"Hullo, copper!" said Peter heartily as he entered, then halted in embarrassment, until he recognized two of Quayle's other visitors. The third he did not for the moment notice.

Johnny Hattingh, a fair young man, with the physical build of a rugby player, flipped a large hand at Peter.

"What-ho, my son! Have you been robbed, too?"

"Robbed?" said Peter curiously.

"Stop your nonsense, Johnny," said Patricia Hattingh to her step-son briskly. "Hullo, Peter. Look, Inspector, we're in a hurry, and if you'll give me my letters"—it seemed to Peter that she stumbled over the word—"and Simon's money, we'll be frightfully grateful."

QUAYLE looked doubtful. "There'll have to be a case; and there's the question of exhibits—of course, if you and Mr. Hattingh want the money—"

"Oh, bother the money!" cried Patricia. "That's Simon's. But the letters are mine. Have you read them?" she demanded fiercely.

The policeman looked aghast. "Of course not; that is, when I saw that they were—er—"

"I bet he never got past the first 'Darling,'" Johnny Hattingh said. "And, hang it all, you ought to be able to write love letters to your own husband!"

"What I can't understand," said Quayle irritably, "is why Mr. Hattingh didn't come personally."

It was Patricia's turn to laugh. "You mean," she said, "didn't he value them enough to bother? Still, you'd have thought the money would have brought him, wouldn't you?" Her voice was bitter. "Well, it seems it didn't. He sent Johnny and me to collect them. So hand them over."

Quayle jerked open a drawer and brought out a fat white envelope and a small packet of letters. "Here's the money, Mrs. Hattingh." He handed over the envelope. "And the letters. You'll give me a receipt?"

"Write one, Johnny," said Patricia, and thrust the envelope into her pocket. The letters she balanced in her hand for a moment. "I don't for the life of me know why I ever wrote them," she said.

Johnny blotted the receipt. "Okay, Pat. Let's go. 'By, Peter. Thanks, Inspector."

He hustled her out, and Inspector Quayle mopped his high brow.

"What the devil—" Peter began.

"A native got in and swiped some of Hattingh's cash and the lady's letters, written to him before their marriage. He kept them locked up with the cash. And that," said Quayle bitterly, "is about the only tribute he seems to have paid her. Locked up! Yes, and so is she. I rang up the house as soon as I'd recovered the stuff. It seems he hadn't even known he'd been robbed.

"'Send it back, whatever it is,' says he, in that aloof voice of his, 'and I'll tell you if it's mine.'

"I tried to explain that it was something of his wife's. 'Oh!' said Hattingh, 'my wife's!' And you could feel the temperature drop. 'In that case, I'll send her round. She can collect it herself. It's of no value to *me!*'"

The third person in the room rose. Peter was aware of his presence for the first time. He was small, plump and brown, with brown eyes behind large spectacles.

Jeremy Quayle Through a Maze of Black Magic!

"I may be excused?" His voice was soft and sing-song, in the manner of the educated Bantu. "If the bush is beaten, the hare will emerge."

"Go along, Xosa. That was pretty smart work." Quayle turned to Peter. "Mafuti Xosa," he said. "He's a good native detective. He picked up the scent of this unreported robbery in the location, and was back with the thief and

Inspector Quayle

the swag in a couple of hours. It seems the thief climbed a pillar to the verandah, and was so proud of his feat that he couldn't resist telling all his pals."

Peter nodded. He was not thinking of Mafuti Xosa, but of the blue-eyed, golden-haired Patricia Hattingh and her husband. He did not like Simon Hattingh, though he had met the man only once, and wondered why Patricia, who was years younger, had ever married him. It always struck one as a sordid, queer business when a woman married a man who had sons as old as herself. But then it was hinted that the girl's poverty had had something to do with it. Simon was very rich.

"A nice girl," said Quayle.

Peter grinned. "Better not tell Ann that. She doesn't like her." Then the thought of Ann reminded him of his recent ordeal at the hands of the tea-drinking females. "Quayle," he said earnestly, "do you by any chance possess some cold beer?"

From the outside, in the dusty, deserted street, they heard the silence shattered by the roar of Johnny's sports car's exhaust. It died away abruptly. Quayle poured the beer in a cool silence.

The case of the Straw Men had begun.

* * * * *

Peter Blake had not visited Maxwell Johnson's low, pleasantly sprawling white cottage until that Sunday morning because he had not been long in Marathon. He was on his annual vacation from his work as a mining engineer on the Rand. But he had met Johnson at the Dixons—Ann's father, Sir Henry Dixon, was a retired Commissioner from British West Africa—where he was staying, and Johnson had discovered that he was rather interested in anthropology.

IT WAS nearly noon, when Blake arrived, and Johnson appeared on the white stoep, blinking against the strong sun, almost before Peter had clicked the latch of the gate. He came bustling down the path, fastening the robe of his dressing gown. Behind the anthropologist came the little Bantu detective, Mafuti Xosa.

Johnson half turned to him, and it seemed to Peter that he paused imperceptibly. "Thanks, Xosa," he said. "Thanks for coming. Good-by." He turned to Peter as the little Bantu bowed, went out through the gate. "Morning, Blake," said Johnson. His voice was deep-toned. "Look here, I'm glad you're early! We'll have time for a real chin-wag. Though it's an ungodly hour for exhibiting horrors. But I've promised to take the others to the Evil House later on, and you might as well imbibe the atmosphere. Eh? Well, come along!"

Peter laughed. Johnson, a broad, burly man, stumped up the path at a curious shuffling gait. He had on carpet slippers. He turned, and lifted a sardonic eyebrow.

"Yes, in the sunlight, you can laugh. Just a few dried heads, sticks and

stones. But you should have seen them as I first saw them, in ju ju houses in the tall grass, with the trees blotting out the sun, and the air still and thundery—as it will be shortly here, today, if this heat lasts!"

For no reason that he could name, Peter shivered a little in the heat. They went through a high cool hall, and a comfortable living room, to tall double doors where Johnson thrust a key into the lock.

With a wave of his hand he ushered Peter in.

There were tall windows in one wall, but green blinds were drawn down over them. The big room swam in a green haze. It had the hush, the expectancy almost, that always seem to cling to the Egyptian Room in a museum. But it contained nothing so civilized as mummies and sarcophagi. There were spears and arrows and blow-pipes for poisoned darts in fan-shapes round the walls, and above them, a sort of frieze of devil masks ran all round the room. Glass cases held the centre of the floor, and Peter almost averted his eyes from one of them, for it contained human heads, dried and wrinkled. In another was a sort of grass gown, long enough to cover a six-foot man, and alongside it in the case was a spear.

At the far end of the room, facing the double doors, was a squat black chair, like a rudely hewn throne, flanked by grinning wooden faces; and on either side of the doors, and in each corner of the room, were poles, carved and twisted to a hundred grimacing gargoyles. They were standing before one of the totem poles when Peter's eyes were drawn to the devil mask frieze round the room.

He noticed abstractedl that one mask was missing.

Johnson laid a big hand lovingly on the dully gleaming polished wood.

"No other people in Africa can carve these things like the Mechwana," he said. "They're master craftsmen. People call them savages. Pah! They are different from us; but they have their own complicated code, and some of it's quite sensible. Now that drum over there"—he pointed to the tom-tom with its black skin stretched tight—"was made of human flesh. But whose? Why, I'll tell you. One of the worst Arab slavers who ever set foot in Africa." He sounded almost defiant. "Only the guilty suffered, my friend, from the vengeance of the Straw Men."

"The Straw Men?" Peter repeated, puzzled.

"The witchdoctors. No Mechwana might look on their faces and live, so they wore this"—he strode across and tapped the glass case that contained the cloak of woven grass—"and also"—he paused—"a mask. And in addition to that, they gave a sign of their coming. It might be two crossed sticks outside a hut, or a snake's sloughed skin, or cowrie shells tied on a string. When the sign appeared, everyone got out quick—except the victim. He stayed."

"You mean," said Peter, "he just sat there and waited for something to come?"

"He just waited," said Johnson.

"And what happened when they—the Straw Men—did come?"

"Who knows?" said Johnson slowly, and Peter shuddered.

"Did you manage to get a mask as well?" he asked hurriedly.

"I got a mask and an execution ax," said Johnson, and added with a curious precision, "I can show you the ax."

HE shuffled past the glass case, and Peter followed. Hanging on the wall, between two fans of poisoned darts, was a formidable two-headed ax, with a long wooden shaft bound with tough plaited grass.

The anthropologist looked up at it and said: "I wonder if he'll call and collect that next time."

"I beg your pardon?" said Peter, then realized that the man had not been addressing him.

Johnson turned. "You think I'm scared that the Lord High Mumbo Jumbo will come across Africa one of these days and get me for lifting the sacred relics," he said. "You're wrong. I give you my word that this room does not contain a single item that the Mechwana didn't hand over to me of their own free will. Sorry to disappoint any romantic notions you may have been conceiving, Blake. But there is no diamond-from-the-forehead-of-the-sacred-idol about this little lot. Your friend, Sir Henry Dixon, who was Commissioner of Mechwanaland at the time, wouldn't have stood for it; and I wouldn't have stooped to it. No, that's not

"The figure wore a long straw cloak and the executioner's ax" (Chap. VI)

what I'm afraid of." His brown eyes gleamed under their shaggy brows. "I have the Sacred Thrones, freely given. Or perhaps I should say paid for. No Mechwana would touch me."

Peter was looking straight at the empty space on the wall. "Someone stole one of the masks?" he asked.

Johnson nodded. "Yes. That's why I was talking to that fellow, Xosa. He's a detective."

"Which mask?" asked Peter.

Johnson suddenly grinned. "You know," he said slowly, "you're pretty bright! Yes, it was the mask of the Straw Man, the mask of the executioner. That's why I said I wondered if they'd come back for the ax. But, of course, that's all nonsense. I'm perfectly safe. At least"—he paused—"I believe I am safe. If I live to Tuesday morning."

II

PETER BLAKE did not tell Ann or Sir Henry of Johnson's odd words. But they still rang in his mind when the Dixon car drew up before the cottage barely two hours later. The anthropologist was on the stoep, talking to Inspector Quayle.

The Hattinghs arrived directly behind Peter and the Dixons. Now Patricia Hattingh came up to the path flanked by her two tall step-sons. Simon Hattingh parked the car with an old-womanish care and followed his family up the path. He greeted the others limply.

"Thanks," he said to Quayle. "Recovering that stuff that was stolen, you know." His voice sounded tired and querulous.

Johnson's thick eyebrows lifted. "I say! Don't tell me you've been robbed, too?"

"Too?" Hattingh repeated.

"Fellow pinched one of my devil masks," said Johnson. "I was rather hoping Quayle would have news of it, but he hasn't, so far. What did you lose?"

"Nothing of value," said Hattingh. He did not look at his wife. "Some money; a few knick-knacks. And they have all been returned."

"Regular crime wave," grumbled Quayle, "and the worst of it is I'll have to leave Van Niekerk to attend to it. I've got to go to Pretoria to attend a brass hats' chinwag," he explained. "Leaving on Tuesday."

Johnson glanced at his watch. "How about a swim?" he suggested. "Before I show you over my Chamber of Horrors?"

Eric Hattingh, the elder son, tall and thin with red-rimmed eyes, had wandered restlessly from the stoep into the house. Now he re-appeared with a book in his hand. It was "Customs of the Mechwana," by Maxwell Johnson.

"Swimming?" he said. "No. I think not." He extended the book to Johnson. "May I read this?"

"Flattered," chuckled the anthropologist.

Eric sank limply into a chair and opened the book.

"I think I shall stay here, too," said Simon Hattingh. He did not look at his wife. Father and son were still seated together, in silence, when the others returned.

Sir Henry shook the water from his lean brown torso like a spaniel. "Don't bother to change," said Johnson. "It's only a step."

Johnson led the way around the side of the house. The corner chimney of the big cottage was silhouetted sharply against the vivid, cloudless sky. It was very hot and still, and dragon-flies darted across the flower-beds.

A native busy in the corner did not raise his head. He was naked save for a loin cloth and two bands of red material, one round his right ankle and one round his right wrist. This was Chwana, Johnson's servant.

Johnny Hattingh said: "You haven't explained this 'Evil House' of yours yet, Mr. Johnson."

The anthropologist smiled. "Sort of ju ju house, old boy. Of course, the one you're going to see isn't an original one. Chwana and I built it ourselves. But it's a faithful replica; and it's got all the original trappings."

"What did they use it for?" asked Johnny languidly.

"For executions," Johnson said briefly, and led the way into the thickness of a little wood.

In the centre was the Evil House. It was, at first sight, a disappointing-looking structure. The roof was flat thatch, and the clay walls were rough. There appeared to be no windows, except four narrow slits in the wall directly under the thatching. In the centre of the wall was a square wooden door.

"Well, Sir Henry?" Johnson was grinning. "Is it anything like the real thing?"

Sir Henry's lean brown face was slightly troubled. "Never saw one," he replied. "*You* know they wouldn't let a white man near 'em. I don't know yet how *you* managed it." He spoke pointedly.

"Mechwanaland," said Peter, because he felt that someone had to say something, "must be one of the least known territories in Africa."

"God-forsaken hole," said Sir Henry frankly. "And yet it had its fascination. Their witchdoctors had a powerful reputation. They were supposed to be able to do all sorts of things. Die and come to life again. Walk right through stone walls. If some of the things I saw myself were just conjuring tricks, they were exceptionally good conjurors."

"Did you," asked Johnny, "ever have any trouble?"

"Harrumph!" Sir Henry blew his nose. "Trouble? Nothing to speak of. Look here, if you want to know anything about the Mechwana, ask Johnson here. He's an authority. I was only the Commissioner. I say, Johnson," he went on, "what was the name of that fellow you had with you up there? Funny names, always makes me think of a policeman?"

"Judson Holmes?" said Johnson, and chuckled.

"What happened to him?"

"Nothing," said the anthropologist. "He's still alive—and kicking, I should

imagine. In fact—" He stopped. "Well, come on."

WHEN they stood beside the Evil House they found it was about ten feet high. The door was a massive one of teak, sunk deep in thick clay walls. Johnson pushed, and the door swung open with a harsh grating sound. There was a great bar fixed to its inner side that could swing down and lock them in.

Inside stout poles supporting the roof ran down the center, at intervals of about six feet. At the far end, facing them, was a sort of throne, a twin to the one Peter had seen in the house, and this too was flanked by carved grinning faces, while in front of the chair, black stones had been arranged in a rough semi-circle. Round the walls at regular intervals there were crude iron brackets, and in each bracket had been thrust a tall torch ready for lighting.

Johnson cleared his throat, preparatory to lecturing but he was interrupted as Simon Hattingh made a harsh sound, like tearing paper.

"Confound you, Johnson!" he snarled, as fear blazed in his eyes. "Confound you!" He turned and clawed at the heavy door. They heard his feet rap across the hard earth outside.

"Oh, Lord!" muttered Sir Henry, "I was afraid of this." And Johnson exclaimed: "I didn't think—he knew what he was going to see."

"Don't you think," said Patricia Hattingh, "that we ought to be getting back?" She took Johnson's arm, and they wound their way in silence through the wood. But Patricia and Johnson went ahead, and the others heard her clear voice floating back to them.

When they reached the cottage, there was no sign of Simon Hattingh. Eric was talking nervously to a stranger as they approached. "Oh, mother!" he called. "Johnny! Dad said he had to hurry back. He's left the car."

Maxwell Johnson strode up to the stranger. He was a small, thin man, with thin black hair and small gimlet eyes. He was wearing a blue serge suit, which was badly faded. A cigarette that clung damply to his lips had a crooked inch of ash.

"Hullo, Maxwell!" The man's voice was husky, as with too many cigarettes and too many drinks. " 'Lo, Sir Henry!" He flipped a hand and grinned.

"Judson Holmes," said Johnson, and performed introductions. He did not seem surprised to see the man.

The others went to change. Presently Ann came out on the stoep, frowning. "I've mislaid my watch," she said. "I took it off, and left it with my other things, when we went to bathe."

They searched. Moved by a sudden thought, Peter put his hand in his blazer pocket.

"It looks," he murmured to Quayle, who had been staring at the stranger, "that your thief has been at work again."

Quayle swung around. "Eh? What's that?"

"My watch has gone, too," said Peter. "And my cigarette-lighter. Also the cigarette-case and a handful of silver I shoved in here."

The search was suddenly renewed with a new object. When it was concluded they looked at each other with blank faces. Sir Henry had lost a pipe with a gold band round the stem, and a little silver box for matches. Ann's bracelet had gone with her watch.

Maxwell Johnson had lost nothing but when he put his hand in his pocket he drew out a curious object which had not been there before, a string with four cowrie shells tied to it.

Peter Blake suddenly recalled that this was a traditional sign of the coming of the Straw Men.

* * * * *

Though night brought no relief from the heat, a storm was obviously brewing. Over the dark sea blue lightning flashed faintly as Ann Dixon and Peter Blake walked slowly up the road. Johnny Hattingh had asked them to call on him after dinner.

The Hattingh home was a double-story mansion standing in rather dank and neglected grounds. To the right there was a large garage for two cars; broad stone steps led up to the front door. Two pillars supported a verandah that ran the width of the house's front. The upper story was given over to the two brothers. Simon and his wife occupied the lower floor.

The front door was open. As they came into the hall Patricia Hattingh emerged from a door on the right. Simon Hattingh came out from a room on the other side of the hall.

"Ready, my dear?" he asked; but his voice was cold.

Patricia nodded. "Yes."

Hattingh glanced up at a grandfather clock, ticking heavily on the staircase landing.

"Is that the right time?"

Patricia nodded. "Yes. It's right by my watch, and I've just set that by the wireless. We'd better hurry. Susan hates to be kept waiting."

SIMON nodded, and husband and wife turned to the doorway. When she saw the two standing there, Patricia's perfect lips parted in a smile.

"Hullo!" she said brightly. "I say, I'm sorry we've got to run out. Simon's taking me into town to see Susan Epworth. Johnny dashed out for cigarettes a little while ago, but he said he'd be back in a brace of shakes. Will you go upstairs and make yourselves comfortable? You know the way."

They went out and Ann and Peter went up the stairs, Peter noting that the clock hands stood at 8:20. As they reached the top of the stairs Eric Hattingh appeared, buttoning himself into a coat, though the night was sticky. He started as he saw them but said nothing, and went on down the stairs.

In Johnny's quarters, all the lights were ablaze. Johnny's mark was on the rooms. Rowing sculls were crossed in a corner, and in another, golf clubs jostled tennis racquets. There was also an empty walnut cabinet while above the mantle-shelf was a photograph of a Springbok team. The room was like a breath of fresh air in this stuffy mausoleum.

Ann and Peter sat together on a sofa to wait for their host. Presently they heard Johnny's cheerful whistling in the hall. Like a tactful man, he whistled rather louder than was necessary, and even made a pretense of barging into the clock on the stairs with a great clatter, before he appeared in the doorway, grinning and dusting his hands.

"Why the blazes can't we have some more lights in this house?" he roared. "Nearly pitched that clock over the stairs and broke my neck at the same time. Well, my hearties! How about a spot of the old and bold?"

Johnny went to a sideboard and juggled with glasses and bottles. At the same time he jerked a thumb at the empty cabinet. "Got my old trophies under lock and key now," he confided. "Not taking any chances with this sneak thief who seems to be around."

He crossed the room, bearing glasses.

"Snuffle it up, souls," he said. "Get the taste of the Chamber of Horrors out of your mouths. For the next lap of this thrilling serial is now due to commence. I bet there'll be a pair of bloody hands, sawed off at the wrists, waiting for us in the next installment."

Johnny gave it as his opinion that the cowrie shells found in Johnson's pocket had a simple explanation: they had been put there by Johnson himself. When Peter revealed that cowrie shells (according to Johnson) were the mark of the coming of the Straw Men, Johnny nodded energetically.

"That's what I mean. The old boy was working up the atmosphere. He wanted to scare my old man."

"Wanted to scare your father?" repeated Peter.

Johnny nodded. "Of course you don't know the story." He settled himself comfortably. "You see, when Johnson was up there in Mechwanaland, on a scientific trip with that fellow Judson Holmes as his assistant, and your father"—he grinned at Ann—"was the Commissioner, *my* old man rolled up with a crowd of the lads from Johannesburg. They were on a spree, having just made a financial killing of some kind, and of course they ran smack into trouble. Apparently one of them—and I have heard my father named as the culprit—got funny with one of the Mechwana women and, as luck would have it, she turned out to be one of the wives of a head guy in the Society of Straw Men. The boys got out, with spears and what not whizzing past their ears. But my old man wasn't so lucky. He was nabbed.

"As to what transpired thereafter, a veil has been drawn by all parties concerned. But it seems that if Johnson hadn't been in the vicinity, measuring these chaps' skulls or whatever it is he does, my old man would have been headed for the cooking pot. But by some means Johnson had got a powerful grip on the Mechwana, and he persuaded them to let my old man go. By that time he was tied up like a turkey in their ju ju house—one like the one we were in today—and that, you see, is why he

thought it such bad taste on Johnson's part to lead him to the double of the old shack today."

Peter said: "It's a coincidence, isn't it, that Sir Henry, Johnson and your father should land together in this spot, after all these years?"

Johnny nodded. "Yes, I suppose it's a bit rummy," he admitted, and went on talking quickly. But Peter was scarcely listening. What Johnny had just told them explained many things but it did not explain everything. He could not believe that Maxwell Johnson had deliberately planted these cowrie shells in his own pocket, simply to mystify them. Johnson was not that sort. He wondered too what Johnson had meant about being safe by Tuesday.

Suddenly the telephone rang shrilly.

Johnny answered it. He listened, and they saw him start. Over his shoulder he said to Ann, in a surprised voice: "It's your father." They saw his finger tighten over the 'phone. "Okay, Sir Henry," he said. "We'll be right over. Eh? Yes, she's here, with Peter. What? Yes, of course. But it may not be easy. She has a will of her own!"

He banged down the instrument, and turned to face them. Excitement burned in his blue eyes.

"Your father's over at Johnson's," he told Ann. "Something's up. He wants Peter and me over there right away. Johnson has vanished.

"Vanished?" echoed Peter.

"Yes. The native servant—Chwana—saw him leave. He says he went out of the house, walking backwards!"

III

AS they reached Johnny's car the rain began. It came suddenly and in a solid sheet. Lightning flashed.

A few minutes later they found Johnson's cottage alive with lights. A short figure darted out from the shelter of the stoep and came blundering through the rain toward them. They looked into the troubled eyes of Sir Henry Dixon.

"Into the house," he said briefly.

They followed him inside. The place was stuffy with the smell of burning incense. Sir Henry glanced briefly at Ann.

"Told them not to bring you," he said. "Never mind, you're here now." To the men he said flatly: "Johnson's not in

As Ann opened the door, Eric Hattingh tilted back and fell with a dull thud to the marble floor (Chap. VII)

the house. I've searched it. I've phoned for the police. Look here."

They had been standing in the hall. Now he flung open the door of the living room. Someone had ransacked it. Even the chair-covers had been ripped up. Books out of the bookcase strewed the floor.

Peter marched through to the collection room. The door was unlocked. He went in, and his eyes went straight to the wall. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that the executioner's ax was still hanging there, where he had last seen it. Then he cried out. The glass case which had contained the grass robe was smashed open and empty! And he remembered grimly that in addition to the vestment thing, there had been a spear there. He noticed, too, that there was no longer a blank oval on the wall between the devil masks; the frieze was complete.

The others were crowded in the doorway, watching him. "Look here," said Peter. "Where's Johnson's servant, Chwana?"

"In the kitchen," said Sir Henry. "He's unconscious. I got the tail end of the story out of him before he passed out."

"Attacked?"

"No. Drugged. He'd been smoking dagga — you know, that hemp stuff. Xosa's attending him."

"What's he doing here?" Peter asked.

Sir Henry shrugged. "He arrived shortly after I did. I've 'phoned for Quayle. . . . Ah, there's the Inspector now."

It was. A car door slammed, and Quayle appeared through the curtain of rain, shaking the water from his hat. "What's up?" he said.

Sir Henry told him briefly what he had told the others.

Quayle was frowning. "What did you get out of the native servant?"

"He'd been smoking dagga," said Sir Henry gloomily. "You know what that means. I asked him where his master was. He looked up at me, rolling his eyes, and there was froth on his mouth. He said the 'white chief' was dead. He knew Johnson was dead because he'd seen him walking backwards out of the house."

"Backwards!" said Quayle

"Backwards," said Sir Henry grimly. "I questioned him further, but I didn't get much more out of him. He was passing out rapidly. But he did say he could tell by Johnson's face, when he saw him walking, that he was already dead. He went out of the door and into the garden and vanished into the darkness. It wasn't raining then. But there was a flicker of lightning, and Chwana saw Johnson's face. The mouth was hanging open."

There was a long silence. "What did Chwana do next?" asked Johnny.

Sir Henry shrugged. "He says he knew Johnson was dead 'in another place,' whatever that means. So apparently he started burning that incense stuff as a sort of lament."

"Which way was Johnson supposed to be going, when he walked backwards?" asked Quayle.

Sir Henry fiddled with an unlighted pipe. "Ah! That's just it. Chwana says Johnson—or his corpse—was walking toward the Evil House."

Quayle produced a torch from his pocket. "Then that," he said grimly, "is where we're going."

They went out and followed the path into the wood. The trees closed round them. It had stopped raining as suddenly as it had begun. In the ray of Quayle's flashlight the dripping leaves glistened oilily.

The little Bantu detective, Mafuti Xosa, appeared from nowhere, his white hat sopping wet, and padded along softly at their rear.

"Who's there?" Quayle called suddenly.

A figure was blundering along toward them. It was Simon Hattingh. There was a patch of mud on his trousers, and a branch had caught and ripped the sleeve of his coat. The veins in his red face were congested and his bulging eyes stared wildly at them. He clawed at the policeman's coat and his voice was a harsh rasp. "Where is she?" he demanded.

They stared at him.

"Where is she?" shouted Hattingh, and shook the policeman's arm. "Blast him! What has he done with my wife?"

QUAYLE gently disengaged Hattingh's hand from his arm. "Your wife, Sir? Is she here? We haven't seen her. We're looking for Mr. Johnson. He's disappeared."

Hattingh fairly screamed. "You mean

he's packed up and gone away?"

"No, sir," said Quayle. "His servant tells a queer story about his having gone to the ju ju house."

"So!" Hattingh looked relieved. Then he laughed malignantly. "The ju ju house! The love nest, you mean! Come on! I'll go with you." Hattingh, laughing softly to himself, hurried ahead, and when they came abruptly out of the whispering trees, he pointed. "There you are! You'll find them there!"

The Evil House was a black shadow; but it was not solidly black. Through the slit windows under the black thatching, fitful light gleamed. Someone had lit the torches.

"Stand where you are!" said Quayle sharply.

He cast his electric torch in a wide arc on the ground. The clearing was now a smooth expanse of liquid mud. Quayle examined it closely and seemed to find it interesting.

But Hattingh was impatient. He made a fretful move forward. "Johnson, you swine!" he shrieked. "We've got you. You and that woman!" He called her an unprintable word. "Come out!"

There was no sound. Johnny Hattingh yelled. "Johnson! Are you there?" There was still no sound.

"All right," said Quayle. "Come on."

They went gingerly across the stretch of mud. They were only a few feet from the ju ju house when from inside there came a scraping, crawling sound. Then there was the scrape of wood and a dull thud.

Peter remembered. "The bar!" he said. "Someone's putting down the bar."

With an oath, Quayle hurled himself against the door. It was unyielding. Then Johnny Hattingh tapped Peter on the arm.

"Hoist," he said, and pointed to the window slits under the thatch. Peter bent down and took the strain of Johnny's weight. Johnny clawed his way up the yellow wall until he could grip the edge of the narrow window. With an athlete's ease he drew himself up until he could look in.

"Johnson's in there," he said. "Lying on the floor. I can see him plainly in the light of the torches. There's blood coming from under him. But I'll stake my dying oath there's no one else in there!"

No one moved as Johnny climbed down. Quayle frowned. "And you say there was no one else in there except Johnson?" His voice was tinged with incredulity.

"No one," said Johnny. "I could see the whole of the inside." He started. "Wait a minute! Someone might have been hiding behind that chair."

They remembered the heavy black chair, with the animal feet. Quayle snapped his fingers. In an instant Fafuti Xosa was by his side. The inspector said something to him in a low tone. Xosa nodded, and went padding out of sight, round the corner of the ju ju house. He had produced another flashlight, though the moonlight was strong, and was flashing it on the ground in front of him.

"Look!" Quayle spoke strongly. "There's no way in—so far as we know—except by this door. We've got to break it in but we'll never do it without help."

Sir Henry coughed. "I—"

"No." Johnny looked back the way they had come, at the dark wall of the trees at the edge of the clearing. He seemed to be calculating. "I'll go. I'm armed, you see." Surprisingly, he pulled a gun from his pocket. "There *might* be someone in that wood."

"Right." Quayle jerked his head in the direction of the house. "Ring up the station. Van Niekerk is on duty. Ask him to come out here and bring two native constables with him, and some sort of battering ram. And the doctor," he added.

Johnny nodded. "Can I borrow your torch?"

The policeman gave it to him. Johnny looked at them thoughtfully, balancing the electric torch in one hand and the gun in the other. He nodded slightly. "Well, bung-ho."

It was the oddest remark they had heard that night.

JOHNNY went across the clearing, his shoes squelching in the mud. He followed their tracks, which ran in a straggling line to the trees. They watched Johnny disappear and in the minutes that followed they strained their ears instinctively for some cry out of the wood. But none came.

"Excuse me," said Quayle politely. "Er, keep watching the door, will you?" He went swiftly along the wall of the

squat house and disappeared round the corner, in the direction that Xosa had taken.

Peter felt that he had to talk. "Look here, sir!" he said, addressing Sir Henry. "If there is someone in there, he's keeping very quiet."

Sir Henry considered. "Might try to rush us as we go in? Probably armed. When the police come, Ann, you'd better clear out."

The girl said nothing.

"They've been carrying on for a long time." Simon Hattingh's voice broke in upon them harshly. "I've never been able to get proof. But I did, tonight."

Unobserved, the clouds had thickened in the sky and now they flowed across the moon. They were plunged into abrupt darkness. It should have gone cold, but it seemed suddenly warmer. Once again Peter imagined he could detect that musty smell coming under the door.

They started violently at a shuffling sound.

"Only me," said Quayle. "I wish Van Niekerk would hur—Ah! Someone's coming."

There were lights in the trees, and voices. Five men came out of the woods in single file, with Johnny in the lead. Two of them were carrying a long heavy pole, and the third swung a bag.

Quayle put his hands round his mouth and called: "Keep in the tracks! Follow the tracks, men."

Obediently the newcomers came across the mud, adding to the line of footprints. Quayle gave his directions to the two men with the pole. "All together," he said.

The door cracked under the third blow. "Again!" cried Quayle, heaving with the rest, including Peter. The door gave way with a rumbling tearing noise, the ram nosing its way through a footwide gap. "Steady!" Quayle fumbled in the gap. He was levering the bar up out of its niche. "Now!"

The door swung open slowly. Quayle had borrowed Johnny's gun and now he held it ready. They peered into the Evil House. At the back of the hut, facing them, the torches winked on the crude carved throne and the semi-circle of black stones. But nothing moved.

Johnson lay at the foot of the pole nearest the door. He was lying on his face, and his arms were stretched out in front of him, embracing the pole. The man with the bag dropped on one knee beside the anthropologist, and levered him over onto his back. They caught a glimpse of the front of a white linen jacket, now stained with blood.

"This man is still alive," said the doctor, and raised Johnson's head.

Johnson stared at them over the doctor's shoulder, his neck resting against the pole. His hands trailed in the dust of the earthen floor and suddenly the fingers scrabbled horribly. Johnson's mouth worked and then his head dropped and rolled limply.

"Dead?" said Quayle.

The doctor nodded, and laid him gently back.

The four policemen now fanned out into a line and then, with the two native constables hugging the walls, and Quayle and Van Niekerk in the center, they walked slowly through the hut. Quayle lifted a foot and sent the high, carved chair askew with a hard kick. His gun was lifted, but nothing stirred. Behind the chair was only the blank wall.

Quayle's face was grim. He looked up at the roof, and at his direction one of the natives went up the pole like a uniformed ape. He reached the thatching, poked, grunted, and slid to earth.

"What the devil," the doctor asked, "are you looking for?"

"The murderer," said Quayle.

The doctor stared. "He must have got out some other way."

Quayle pounced. "Then it couldn't be suicide?"

"What did he do it with?" asked the doctor.

The inspector looked at Johnson's bloody coat. "I see what you mean," he muttered. "There doesn't seem to be any weapon." He accented the "seem." "But look here, doctor—what if he had a small knife?"

The doctor laughed. "What you should be looking for," he replied, "is a sword or a spear. No 'small knife' did that."

WHILE the others waited outside, peering in, with bemused minds, Quayle and Van Niekerk searched the ju ju house, but with no result. The two natives went for a stretcher and when they returned the doctor superintended the body's removal. The others fol-

lowed. Once again Quayle warned them to keep in the same line of tracks. While the other policemen went back through the wood to the house, he and Xosa stayed behind. Peter looked back and saw them prowling in the mud, flashing their torches.

The big white cottage still had all the lights blazing.

A thin figure, smoking a cigar, leaned out toward them. It was Judson Holmes.

"Where the devil's Johnson?" he began in a high, irritable voice. The smoke caught his throat, and he coughed. "What's going on? That native's propped up in the kitchen, dead to the world, after a dagga jag."

Then he saw the figure on the stretcher, and his face was a mask of fury. "Who—" he said, and choked. "Murdered. I'll tear—" He saw Simon Hattingh, and his screwed-up eyes fired on Hattingh's face. "You hated him." His voice was flat and quiet. "He was a better man than you, and you knew it. So you went on hating him quietly, inside, all these years. But I'll see that you hang for it!"

Simon Hattingh swayed. "Go away," he said, and put up a weary hand. "It's insane. The whole thing is insane." There was fear in his eyes. "I came here looking for my wife," he went on. "I —I understood I should find her here. But she doesn't seem to be. There must be some mistake."

Van Niekerk caught him by the arm as he swayed again. "Into the house, sir. I think you need a spot of brandy. In fact, I think we all do. You!" He turned sharply on Holmes. "Inspector Quayle will want to see you."

"You don't say!" said Judson Holmes, and led the way into the smashed-up living room. Van Niekerk stared at the ripped furniture and the tumbled books. So did Holmes. "Someone been having a treasure hunt?" asked Holmes, but no one answered him.

Quayle came in, with Xosa at his heels. He started when he saw Holmes, then turned to Van Niekerk.

"The — gentleman — was here when we got back," said the sergeant.

"Ah!" said Quayle. He drew Van Niekerk aside, and muttered something to him. The sergeant nodded, though he looked doubtful.

The doctor came in. "I've rung for the ambulance," he said to Quayle. "I'll submit a report tomorrow. I'll work all night on it, probably," he added lugubriously.

Quayle took a turn up and down the room, in silence. Van Niekerk and the two native constables had gone out. They heard the ambulance wail up, and the doctor's voice giving instructions. Xosa sat in a corner, unobtrusively. At a glance from Quayle, he produced a notebook.

"I'm sorry," said Quayle, "I know it's late." The clock on the wall said half-past eleven. "But I'll have to ask a few questions."

He seemed to find difficulty in phrasing what was in his mind, and spoke slowly.

"Most of you saw the things I saw tonight. You must realize that they add up to an impossibility. Mr. Johnson was in that hut, and he was dying. Someone inside bolted the door. Perhaps Mr. Johnson did it himself, and then killed himself; only we found no trace of the weapon, and the doctor says it was something big, like a sword, or a spear.

"If anyone else was in that hut, how did he get out? There's no other exit but the door, and from the moment it was barred we never left it.

"But here's the clinching thing! It began to rain tonight at about half-past nine, and came down in torrents, until a little after ten. That clearing where the hut is was turned to liquid mud. I searched that ground and there's not a footprint on it but the ones we made ourselves. If the murderer did get out of the hut, while we were standing there— how did he get across the mud without leaving any marks?"

IV

QUAYLE paced the carpet. "Mr. Johnson had been threatened."

"Threatened?" Sir Henry looked up.

Quayle nodded. "Yes. But he wouldn't say much. This morning when I called on him, it was by invitation. He said he wanted to consult me as a friend, not as a policeman, on a hypothetical case. He said, 'Suppose a person—call him A—knew something about another person, called B. Suppose A told B that he would use his knowledge, but that he would give B time to escape the consequences. What would B be likely to do?' "

"What did you say?" Sir Henry seemed thoroughly interested.

"I told him I thought it likely that B would try to get hold of the evidence, or whatever it was, against him, before the time expired. To which he said: 'Ah, but suppose that evidence is where B can't possibly lay hands on it? And suppose that evidence is *bound* to come to light when the time-limit has expired, even if B should try to find a way out of his difficulties by liquidating A? Would A be safe then? And would B take the grace allowed him, and get out'?"

Something was whirring in Peter Blake's mind, like a clock about to strike. He said excitedly: "Tuesday!"

Quayle looked at him, "Tuesday?"

Peter gave them the gist of Johnson's odd conversation that morning. "And he finished up," said Peter, "by muttering something about if he was still alive on Tuesday, he would be all right. So don't you see that Tuesday is the time-limit? That's when the evidence is bound to come out, if Johnson is right about it having been put in a place where B couldn't get at it. I suppose he told B it was well hidden, but B—the murderer, of course—didn't believe him. He came up here to search"—he indicated the dishevelled room—"and perhaps Johnson caught him at it. Or perhaps he found the evidence, and then killed Johnson anyway; for even if he had the evidence, Johnson could still talk."

Quayle was rubbing his chin. "It fits. But the doctor said Johnson was killed by a spear. That native—" He spoke rapidly to Xosa, who folded up his notebook and went out. Quayle turned to Sir Henry. "If you wouldn't mind, Sir Henry, telling me now just the facts as you know them? I mean, what you found when you got here, and so on?"

Sir Henry frowned. "I'm afraid I can't be much help. Tonight, after Ann and Peter had gone round to see Johnny, Johnson rang up and asked me if I could come round to see him. I said Right-o, and went over. I walked, because I felt like a bit of fresh air, and got here at about nine. I walked in. The first thing that hit me was that smell of incense—you remember?"

He glanced at Ann and Peter and Johnny for confirmation, then continued. "I bawled out, but no one answered. Then I pushed on in here. The place was as you see it now. Of course, I realized at once that something was wrong. I barged on into Johnson's collection. At the far end, kneeling down and moaning before that carved chair arrangement, was the native servant, Chwana. He'd lit that incense stuff in a brass bowl and the room was full of it. I could see he was full of dagga, so I yanked him into the kitchen and threw a pail of water over him. But all I got out of him was that muck about Johnson walking out of the house backwards with his mouth hanging open."

JUDSON HOLMES made a sudden strangled noise. Beads of perspiration stood out on his narrow forehead.

"Say that again!" he demanded thickly. "Johnson was what?"

Sir Henry laughed harshly. "I've said, over and over again, that the thing's crazy but Quayle here makes me go on repeating it."

"Crazy! I wish it were!" Holmes was shuddering.

"Stop!" Quayle roared the word. "This is a murder investigation, and it's my job to name the flesh and blood murderer, and land him on a tangible gallows. After that, he can deal in the things of the other world, if he likes. But I will *not*—you understand—have this case intruded upon by Hamlet's father's ghost. Pah, even if the dead man seems to have spent his last day on earth throwing out hints that no one could understand!"

Holmes had recovered his composure. "Sorry, Inspector," he apologized. "But when Sir Henry came out with it, in that matter-of-fact tone—You see, I know just what it means."

"You do?" Quayle's eyes sparkled. "Perhaps we can explain that conundrum away."

But Holmes shook his head. "No, Inspector. I said I know what it means, but I can't explain it. I think," he went on, "that you'd better hear what Johnson's servant, Chwana, has to say. Then, if he says what I think he'll say, I might amplify it for you. But if I told you what was in my mind, before you've heard him, you might book me for the looney bin."

Mafuti Xosa had unobtrusively entered the room. He shook his head sadly

at Quayle. "This fool is still drugged. We must wait."

Quayle exclaimed angrily.

He stopped as Simon Hattingh cleared his throat. "Inspector Quayle," Hattingh said. "You are going round in circles. You say you are investigating the death of Mr. Johnson. But your principal witness cannot be questioned. We all saw"—he shuddered, and it was not acting—"what happened in that—that house. I hope you will catch the murderer though Johnson was no friend of mine. But I put it to you that meanwhile another task awaits your consideration. What has happened to my wife?"

Quayle glanced at the clock, which showed fifteen minutes after midnight. "Your wife?" He smiled. "I should imagine she's now in bed."

"I doubt it," said Hattingh grimly. "However, if I might ring the house? Eric will be there, at any rate, and he may have some news."

There was an instrument on a little table beside the window. At Quayle's nod, Hattingh went to it. He dialed the number and they heard the faint tring-tring of the bell at the other end. The ringing stopped.

"Eric?" Hattingh cleared his throat. "Eric. Something has—happened. Is your—is Patricia there?"

They could hear Eric's high nervous voice over the wire. Patricia Hattingh had not returned home.

"Ask him to come over here," prompted Quayle.

Hattingh nodded. "Eric," he said quickly. "I can't explain over the phone. I'm speaking from Johnson's cottage. Would you come over here right away?" He listened; then turned his head. "He has no car."

Johnny half rose. "I'll get him."

"No." Quayle waved him back. "I'll have a car sent. Tell him to wait." Then, when Hattingh had conveyed the instruction and the telephone was laid down, the policeman had set his long jaw. "You've told me, Mr. Hattingh," he said, "and quite rightly, that if your wife is missing, it's my duty to do something about it. But you haven't given me anything to go on, have you? Would you mind telling me just what you were doing when we arrived, and why you expected to find your wife here?"

Hattingh sat down and passed a hand through his hair. They could see the torn sleeve where he had ripped it on the branch, and there was mud on his trousers.

"My wife and Johnson were having an affair," he said simply. "I had suspected it for some time but I could never get proof. Tonight, though—"

"Yes," said Quayle, "that's what we want to know about."

"She asked me to drive her into town to see Miss Epworth, a friend of hers. I was to pick her up again in an hour. I pretended that I had some business to attend to in town myself, and that the arrangement would suit me very well. I say 'pretended,' because I suspected that she had no intention of calling on Miss Epworth. I believed she meant to spend that hour here, with Johnson.

"We left the house together at fifteen or twenty minutes past eight. Miss Dixon and Mr. Blake will confirm that." He nodded slightly in their direction. "The drive into town took only a few minutes. I dropped my wife at Miss Epworth's flat, and went on. But I returned in a few minutes. My wife was not there, though she was expected. I waited. Miss Epworth can confirm that. In a little while I made an excuse, to leave, and I came straight out here.

"This morning," said Hattingh, and a muscle trembled at the corner of his mouth, "Johnson had—taunted me, and it had given me an idea. I believed that hut was their place of assignation. So instead of coming straight to the cottage, I stopped my car some distance away and cut through the wood."

Quayle's brown eyes were alight. "You went to the ju ju house?"

Simon Hattingh nodded heavily. "My suspicions were confirmed. There were lights in the place. It was as you yourself saw it, later."

"You went in?"

Hattingh shook his head. "No. I had found out what I wanted to find out. There they were—or at least, so I thought. And I—I had an idea."

"We met you tramping through the wood," Quayle reminded him. "Where were you going?"

"I was coming here, to the cottage," said Hattingh. A tinge of malevolence was creeping into his voice. "As I say, I had an idea. Some men," pursued Hat-

tingh, in a sort of ghastly judicial tone, "might have plunged into that hut, shouting threats and resorted to blows with their fists. Or they might have turned away, to seek a weapon—a gun or a knife."

"Ah!" Quayle drew a long breath. "You came to the cottage to get a—a weapon?"

WHEN Hattingh answered, his voice was contemptuous. "No, sir. I said, that was what some men might have done. It is not my way, and these are not the weapons I choose to fight with. I had remembered that Johnson possessed a rather fine camera which, he boasted, could take perfect pictures even by the glow of a fire. I knew where the camera was kept. It was my intention to take it back with me to the hut and secure pictures of the—the *lovers*—without their knowledge."

Quayle blinked at him. "What for?"

"Don't you understand?" Hattingh was still contemptuous. "That would have been my revenge. No brawling; nothing—ungentlemanly. But—perfect evidence for a divorce. I should have divorced her. Johnson wasn't a rich man, you know; not nearly as rich as I am. He couldn't have kept Patricia in the style I do. And luxury was the breath of life to my wife. It would have been the worst punishment I could inflict, to deprive her of it."

Quayle drew a long breath. "So that was your idea of the *gentlemanly* thing! You didn't *take* any pictures by any chance?"

Hattingh shook his head. "I know what you are thinking, Inspector. If my wife was in there with Johnson, then perhaps she— No, it's impossible. You saw the wound. No woman could have inflicted it."

Quayle said: "No. That's not what I was thinking. When you spoke about your wife just now, you used the past tense. You said she *was* fond of luxuries. Why?"

Hattingh laughed, an ugly sound. "So I am the suspect now. No, Inspector. I have told you what form my revenge is liable to take. I said 'was' for a very good reason, however. I am positive that she came here. Johnson is dead, and my wife has disappeared. I very much fear," said Hattingh carefully, "that Patricia's—generous nature—has involved her in the loss of more than wealth. That's why I ask you to set about and look for her without delay." He looked up at Quayle. "It may sound queer to you, but I loved that—that woman!"

They shifted and turned uncomfortably. Quayle rubbed his high pale brow. He turned to the others.

"I'd like brief statements from the rest of you, if you please. Johnny, what can you tell us?"

Johnny had been watching his father. With an effort, he jerked on a smile.

"Not much, Inspector, I'm afraid. But this much I'm sure of." He stabbed a finger at Simon Hattingh. "If she did have any affairs, it wasn't with Johnson. Good grief! The man was old-middle-aged, anyway—and she'd m: one mistake in that direction. She wasn't likely to make another."

"She married me for my money!" said Simon Hattingh viciously.

Johnny's voice cracked like a whip. "You mean you bought her with your money! You chased her around until she gave in, because her mother nagged her day and night to make a marvelous match." He laughed. "But Simon Hattingh always got what he had set his mind on. It got you into trouble once before and it's going to get you into some more!"

Simon Hattingh rose, trembling. "Johnny, I've stood enough from you. You can get out tomorrow."

"Sit down!" Quayle barked the words. "And you, Johnny—shut up! You can settle your personal differences later. Right now we're investigating a murder and trying to find out what's happened to Mrs. Hattingh."

Simon Hattingh sat down. Johnny, whose fists had been clenched, relaxed.

"Sorry, Inspector. You were asking me if I could tell anything . . ." He passed a hand through his fair hair. "Well, I left the house at about eight o'clock. Ann and Peter were coming over to see me, so I buzzed into town for cigarettes. I got back at about half-past eight. Ann and Peter were there. Then Sir Henry rang up. You know the rest."

There was a knock on the front door. The clock pointed to quarter to one. Quayle said: "That'll be Eric."

He went out into the hall, and pres-

ently Eric Hattingh came into the room, followed by Quayle. Eric was wearing the dark raincoat which he had donned earlier in the evening, and under his arm he was carrying Johnson's book.

"Now, sir!" said Quayle, "you'll have grasped that something has happened—something serious."

"Mr. Johnson has been killed?"

The inspector snapped his eyes. "Did Van Niekerk tell you?"

"Van Nie— Oh, the policeman you sent for me?" Eric smiled. "No. He was officially dumb. But it wasn't hard to guess. As a matter of fact, I had been expecting something of the sort.

He tapped the book he was carrying under his arm. "I spent the afternoon reading this, and found it very interesting. Of course, Mr. Johnson himself must have known what was going to happen ever since this morning, so there was no need for me to warn him. But I did think he would have taken some precautions." He shrugged. "I hope it wasn't too painful a death?" he concluded.

Eric Hattingh looked quizzically at the inspector, and Peter Blake suddenly got the impression that he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"I gather from your expressions that it was a puzzling one, anyway," Eric continued, and suddenly thrust the book he was carrying into Quayle's hands. "Whatever it is that's worrying you—a blow struck by an unseen hand, or dead men walking, or a murderer escaping from a locked house with watchers at the exits—you'll find all the answers here in the book that Johnson wrote himself."

V

INSPECTOR QUAYLE threw the book down on the table with considerable violence.

"No!" he shouted. "I don't want your fancy explanations yet. We're going to have this walking backward story and this passing through walls business cleared up right now." He turned to Xosa. "Bring that fellow Chwana in," he ordered.

Xosa went softly from the room, and returned almost immediately with Johnson's native servant. The Mechwana boy tilted and rolled drunkenly, as Xosa piloted him into the room.

"The effect of the dagga is passing off," Xosa told them. "Now he will talk, I think, but he speaks only his own tongue. I know something of it, but too little for a cross-examination. Perhaps—?"

He looked inquiringly at Colonel Dixon and then at Judson Holmes. Surprisingly Quayle picked on Holmes.

"Mr. Holmes. I suppose you talk the lingo, since you were up there with Johnson?"

Judson Holmes nodded and leaned forward in his chair. He spoke for a long time, and Chwana listened, watching him sullenly. Then he, too, broke into speech, talking rapidly and gesturing in high excitement, while Holmes asked an occasional question. Judson Holmes turned to the others with a sigh.

"I guess you won't get much out of him, Inspector. He says his master gave him the afternoon and evening off, and he went to the native location back of town. When he came back, instead of going straight to his own hut at the back of the house, he went to the house to see if Johnson wanted anything. The place was all lit up, and the doors to Johnson's collecting room were open. He thought Johnson was inside and called out. There was no answer and he summoned up his courage—he'd never been in there—and peeped in.

"He saw at once that something was wrong. One of the glass cases was smashed. He rushed in here, and saw the mess." Holmes indicated the strewn books and ripped furniture. "Then he heard a noise in the hall and he went out.

"The hall at that time was in darkness. He heard a sort of scuffling sound. He could see the open door and the garden, dimly, outside. Then a shape passed through the door. He called out again, but no one answered him.

"He went toward the door, and just as he got there, there was a flicker of lightning. In the flash he saw Johnson. He had on a sort of straw cloak, and he was walking backwards. His mouth was hanging open. He disappeared in the direction of the ju ju house.

"Chwana didn't wait to see any more, because according to him Johnson was

plainly dead. I rather gather that he didn't regard this — apparition — as Johnson at all, but only his spirit. He reckoned that Johnson was dead 'in another place.' "

The chief," said Eric dreamily. "Of course. The white chief."

"I can see you've been taking in some interesting reading," said Judson Holmes. "I can explain the odd remark, Inspector. When a Mechwana chief dies —and of course to Chwana, his master was a chief—his spirit always appears to his followers even if he died a thousand miles away. It appears in the village, after sundown, and it is always seen walking backwards." He hesitated. "The spirit is supposed to be going to the ju ju house. It walks backwards because it's *infra dig*, even for a chief, to enter so that he faces the holy spirits. So Chwana didn't do anything after that. Believing Johnson to be dead, he simply went back into the house, put on a few more lights, worked himself into a religious frenzy—he took the dagga then—and started a bit of propitiation of the spirits in the collection room, before the sacred chair."

QUAYLE had been trying to suppress his impatience. "What time did he see Johnson?"

Holmes shook his head wearily. "Chwana can't read the time."

"One moment, please." Xosa padded softly to the wall. Then he laid one forefinger along the hour hand of the clock, and the forefinger of the other hand along the minute hand. For a moment Chwana looked at him vacantly. Then carefully he elevated one forefinger, and put the other at an angle to it.

"Ten past eight!" exclaimed Quayle. "Good work, Xosa! Well! There's fact at last! A fact!" he repeated, and glared at the others, as though they would contradict him.

"Solid ground at last?" asked Eric softly. "You think so?" His tone was pitying.

The policeman whirled on him. "I shall have to ask you to make a statement," he said, "and I *don't* want to know what rubbish you picked out of Mr. Johnson's book. What I want, sir, are straight facts; and the facts I want from you are merely an account of your movements this evening."

ERIC flicked a look at the clock. "Of course you're being very foolish, Inspector, but if you won't listen, you won't listen. Very well. I left the house at about eight-thirty—as I think Miss Dixon and Mr. Blake will testify; I met them as I was leaving. I had an appointment with the minister, Mr. McLean, to play chess, and as my father and step-mother had taken the car, I walked. I got there at"—he paused slightly—"at eight forty-five."

Quayle pounced. "You're sure of the time?"

Eric frowned. "Yes, I *am* sure of the time," he said sharply. "Near enough, anyhow, though I never carry a watch. But as a matter of fact McLean won't support the statement, so I'd better tell you what happened.

"When I arrived, he apologized for not being ready for me, but said that I was rather early. Our appointment was for quarter to nine, and he said that it was only half past eight. We argued a bit about it, mildly, as people do over a trivial point. His clock said eight-thirty, and he maintained it was right by wireless. I said our clock was set by wireless, too; and we agreed to turn on the wireless later and see which one of us was right. But we started our game, and in the end we forgot."

Quayle shrugged. "I don't see that it matters. If you left the house at eight-thirty—and Miss Dixon and Mr. Blake support your time—McLean must have been wrong. In any case, Chwana saw Johnson at ten past eight, and he must have been alive, because he wasn't dead when we found him ourselves. The important thing is, when did you leave McLean, and what did you do after?"

"That's the funny thing," said Eric thoughtfully. "We can't dismiss the time puzzle, Inspector. You see, I got home at about eleven and out of curiosity, I tuned in the wireless to check the time. Our clock was then dead right."

"Then McLean was wrong."

"I said our clock was right *then*. But, you see, I rang up McLean, in a joking way, to tell him. 'About that clock of yours,' I began, but he cut me short. He said he'd just tuned in the wireless, and his clock was right to a hair."

"Yes, sir," said Quayle quietly. "This needs going into. You couldn't both have been right."

Johnny, who had been sitting back in his chair, quietly smoking, banged his fist into his palm.

"WOW!" he exclaimed. "Got it!" Then he put out a hand as though to push the inspector off. "I know what you're going to say," he told Quayle rapidly. "You're going to declare that someone pushed our clock forward, and then the clock was later put back. Well, I can tell you who put the clock back. I did."

Quayle glared. "You didn't say a word of this before," he declared sternly.

"I know," said Johnny humbly. "But how was I to know it might be important? I'd forgotten all about it. . . . Well, as I told you, I popped into town for some cigarettes. I hurried home, because I knew Ann and Peter would probably be waiting for me. I ran up the stairs in semi-darkness, and bumped into the clock. Remember?" He half turned to Ann and Peter. "Anyway, while I was standing there, cursing the thing, I saw that it was a quarter of an hour fast. I have a wrist-watch, you know." He exhibited it. "Without thinking, I put it right."

"Was the clock fast when you went out?" asked the inspector.

"That's just it," said Johnny glumly. "I'll stake my oath that it wasn't."

"Then who," demanded Quayle, "changed the clock after you'd gone?"

They found themselves trying not to look at Simon Hattingh. But he knew what was in their minds. "No, Inspector," he said, "I did not change the clock. Which leaves you with only one alternative."

Quayle nodded. "Yes," he said grimly. "Mrs. Hattingh. And that clears up another little mystery."

They looked at him, perplexed.

"Don't you remember?" said Quayle. "This—yesterday morning. The things that were stolen. They included *watches.*" He went on rapidly, "For some reason of her own, Mrs. Hattingh had planned to steal fifteen minutes of time, and after Johnny left the house, and before Miss Dixon and Mr. Blake arrived—she knew they were coming—she put the clock forward. Her husband was driving her into town. She said she had an appointment with a friend, Miss Epworth; and in fact she did have an appointment. But thanks to the changed clock, when Mr. Hattingh dropped her she still had fifteen minutes to go somewhere else before arriving at Miss Epworth's flat, dead on time. The question is, where did she go?"

Simon Hattingh shrugged. "Isn't it obvious?"

Quayle shook his head. "You mean here, to Johnson? No. The flats where Miss Epworth lives are a good bit from here, and remember, Mrs. Hattingh had to walk. You had the car. No, I think she was planning to go somewhere closer at hand."

AT THIS point Peter Blake turned and saw his fiancée's face. Ann was staring aghast at her father. Peter knew where these flats were, too, and he saw what was in Ann's mind. Only that was impossible. Patricia Hattingh and Sir Henry Dixon!

Quayle pursued his line of thought. "Wherever she went, the plan miscarried. She never turned up at Miss Epworth's at all. Why? Where did she go? And where is she now?"

For some time they had all been aware of sounds outside the room. Once a light had flashed past the windows briefly as the policemen outside, patiently searched the grounds. Now the noises suddenly grew louder. A voice at the door said, "Inspector Quayle!" and Van Niekerk put his head round the corner of the door. His normally ruddy face was pale.

"Could I see you?" he asked.

Quayle swung up and went out of the room. He was gone for a long time.

When he came back he was obviously controlling himself with an effort. Simon Hattingh rose to his feet. "My wife—" he began.

"She was lying in the wood," said Quayle. "She had been strangled."

"Ah!" Simon Hattingh drew in a long breath. "That explains everything. She came here, of course, just as I suspected. And she was strangled—by Johnson. Perhaps she had got tired of him; perhaps she knew I suspected and decided to cut her risks. He lost his temper. He caught hold of her, and he was very strong. Before he knew it, perhaps, she was dead. Then he went out there"—he gestured, indicating the ju ju house—"and killed himself." Simon Hattingh suddenly covered his face with his hands. "God have mercy on their souls!"

After a second of wary silence, Quayle said: "It might be. But it doesn't explain everything. We made—other discoveries." He jerked his head towards the collection room. "Things out of that room were beside the body. That straw cloak that you described." He nodded towards Peter. "It was muddy and it was soaked with blood. And the spear. It had been used."

He glanced suddenly at the clock, which showed the time as quarter to three. Suddenly he became businesslike. "I think you'd better all go home now. But I shall want to see you tomorrow. You especially, Mr. Holmes."

"Sure!" said Judson Holmes. "I'll be at your office, first thing." He got up slowly, his eyes on the table. Peter followed his gaze and saw the book that Eric had brought, Johnson's own book on the customs of the Mechwana.

Quayle saw it, too, and swept it up. "I'll take this," he announced. "Now one last thing. I don't know if you propose to go to sleep for what's left of this night. But if any of you do—lock your door! Mr. Blake, could I see you for just a minute longer?"

When they were alone, Quayle drew Peter into the collection room. "Mr. Blake," said Quayle urgently. "Apart from the case"—he indicated the rifled glass oblong—"and the mask that has been returned—is anything altered in this room since last you saw it yesterday morning?"

Peter looked round. "No. I don't notice anything."

Quayle nodded grimly. "I didn't suppose you would. You weren't familiar with the contents of the room anyway. It was Xosa who noticed it. And it's the reason why I warned them to lock their doors."

He pointed to a fan-shaped display of blow-pipes and poisoned darts on the wall. Part of the ribs of the fan was missing. A pipe was gone, and three of the long, needle-pointed darts.

"The murderer is still hunting," said Quayle.

VI

MONDAY, which was to witness the culminating horror, was another day of intense heat. The sun was already high when Peter Blake walked down the road into the town and, passing the broad entrance of the post office, turned into the police station.

Quayle and Van Niekerk were alone. "Good morning," said Quayle. He looked pensive, and very tired.

"Morning," said Peter, and came straight to the point. "Inspector, d'you remember yesterday, when I barged in here, Mrs. Hattingh was asking you to return some letters to her?"

Quayle nodded. "The letters she said she'd written to her husband before their marriage. You think that perhaps there was more in those letters than met the eye, that they may have been written to another man—Johnson, say? But that's impossible, because they were stolen from Simon Hattingh."

"Hold on," interrupted Peter. "Couldn't it be that Hattingh had got hold of them, and that's why he was so certain that Johnson and his wife had been deceiving him?"

"But Hattingh wasn't even interested enough to bother to get them back," retorted Quayle.

"He might not be too keen to display a violent interest in them," Peter pointed out. "Their theft was unfortunate, but presuming he had already read them, he knew what he wanted to know, and that would give him a first-class motive for murdering both Johnson and his wife."

"So, having made up his mind to murder them, he is quite content to leave the proof of his motive kicking around? And in any case, we can't even prove that Johnson was murdered. And Hattingh is out for another reason. He was standing outside that place with us, last night, when we heard the bar go down." Quayle scowled. "If it weren't for the impossibility of that ju ju house and what we ourselves heard happen there, I'd say Simon Hattingh was right; Johnson killed Patricia Hattingh and then killed himself. But he was killed with that spear we found in the wood, the doctor says. So, if he killed himself, how did the spear get to where we found it? Certainly no one smuggled it out of that hut."

He paused, and a half startled, half incredulous look came into his face. "And yet—if someone did, it would explain a big part of the puzzle." He thumped a big fist on a book on the table. It was Johnson's "Customs of the Mechwana."

There was a cough in the doorway, and Judson Holmes stood looking at them. "You wanted to see me, Inspector. Here I am."

"Yes. Mr. Holmes, come in. What brought you to Marathon?"

It was not the question Holmes had evidently been expecting. But he settled himself in a chair and answered promptly. "Johnson did. He wrote to me a few days ago. He said he needed my advice. He didn't go into details, but he gave me roughly the same idea as he gave you." Holmes nodded at the inspector. "That A and B stuff, and what would B do. I gathered he wanted me to be on hand in case B did do something."

QUAYLE nodded thoughtfully and massaged his chin.

"He indicated that he was threatened by someone? You realized that he himself was A?"

Holmes nodded. "Yes."

"And why do you think he sent for you particularly?"

Judson Holmes' eyes narrowed to bright slits.

"One reason certainly was that he knew he could count on me." He said this with the utmost simplicity. "The other might be—because I knew B."

"Ah!" Quayle leaned back. The answer seemed to please him. "Now, Mr. Holmes, I want you to tell me exactly what transpired in Mechwanaland between you, Johnson, Simon Hattingh and Sir Henry Dixon."

The thin man sat back in his chair. He surveyed them with a glint of amusement. "All right, this is the story. Johnson and I went into Mechwanaland on a scientific expedition. Johnson took me along because I'm a pretty useful hunter, and because I know the native languages. Sir Henry Dixon was then commissioner. We got his permission and went up-river into the heart of Mechwana country. Johnson planned to stay there three to six months." Judson Holmes spoke crisply now. "But we stayed longer. After a while Johnson was burrowing into the heart of native life, getting deeper than any white man had ever got. He decided to become a member of their secret society—the Straw Men."

There was no doubt about his audience's attitude now, and it was keener than ever as he proceeded.

"I think I said once before that Johnson paid for his knowledge of the Mechwana. There were certain rites to go through. You ever noticed that Johnson suffered badly with foot trouble? He always wore carpet slippers, and he shuffled around. That was because for six weeks he went completely native. He had to sleep out in the open, uncovered; march through the jungle; and there was a cutting ceremony."

Peter Blake recalled Johnson, standing in the collection room surrounded by his trophies, and saying with a wry grimace: "Everything bought and paid for."

Judson Holmes continued: "He was away from camp for about two months. It was about the end of that period that I got word of Simon Hattingh's party being in the territory. They'd slipped in under the Commissioner's nose and they were out for what they termed fun." He grimaced. "Then one sundown, one of them burst into my camp. He advised me to get out, quick. He said they'd caught Hattingh monkeying about with one of their women, and they were out for blood. He was beautifully vague about what had happened to Hattingh, but he and the rest of his party certainly weren't waiting to see. They were beating it.

"Then I began to worry about Johnson. The Mechwana might blame him for what had happened, and I didn't know where he was. He'd gone off to be inaugurated in the society. He'd told me to stay put until he returned. I was just about to break camp and set off to look for him when he turned up, thin and limping. His feet— Anyway, he was pretty pleased with himself. He'd passed the tests, and he hadn't heard of the trouble. When I told him he just stood there and cursed softly. Then he said he'd better get what was left of Hattingh out of their hands.

"I tried to keep him back, but when I saw that was of no use, I followed him to the edge of a clearing, and lay there, sweating and praying. It was, as you've probably guessed, the twin to the clearing at the back of Johnson's cottage. There was the Evil House; everything. But the clearing was filled with natives. They were doing a sort of dance, and in the centre was Simon Hattingh!

"Suddenly the tom-toms stopped beating. I can't describe the silence that followed. All these natives just sort of melted away, leaving Hattingh lying there in front of the ju ju house. He wasn't even bound. But he made no attempt to get up.

"Then something approached him, like a shadow. It seemed to me to be about seven feet high, and it wore a sort of long straw cloak, and carried the executioner's ax.

"It said something to Hattingh, and he got up. He walked into the ju ju house; and he walked backwards! He kept his face towards the thing in the straw cloak, and the Straw Cloak followed him. They went into the ju ju house like that. The door of the house opened stealthily as Hattingh neared it, and in they went.

"Then I saw Johnson. He'd been lurking on the edge of the clearing. Now he got up and walked across to the ju ju house and went in. He was there some time. When he came out, Hattingh was following him. I could see Hattingh's shoulders shaking. He was crying. They had blindfolded him. I never saw the guy in the straw cloak again.

"Johnson led Hattingh my way. When he got to me—I don't know how he knew where I was lying—he said quickly: 'Take him back to camp. I'll follow.' Then he went back into that ju ju house.

"Later, at the camp, Johnson told Hattingh to collect his belongings and get out of the territory after his rotten pals. Hattingh said quietly: 'You saved my life, didn't you? I'll never forgive you for that, as long as I live.' Then he went away. I never saw him again until yesterday."

Quayle was glancing over the notes he had made. "Then Sir Henry Dixon doesn't come into your story at all?"

"Not a peek of him. It was strictly a Johnson-Hattingh affair. But Johnson and Sir Henry were good friends. That's all I know."

QUAYLE looked worried. "This story you've told me, Holmes; what does it amount to? Just that Johnson saved Hattingh's life, years ago. It gives no motive for murder."

"Hattingh thought it did," said Holmes viciously. "He was that sort of skunk."

"Even supposing you were right, the motive's fantastic. How about Mrs. Hattingh?"

"Don't forget Hattingh thought his wife and Johnson were having an affair," said Holmes promptly. "My bet is, he killed 'em both. Johnson had evidence against him and was holding it over his head to prevent a fresh attack. Find that evidence, and you'll hang the murderer."

"But how did he do it?" roared Quayle.

Holmes smiled. "How about this? Hattingh drove his wife into town last night. He suspected she was fooling him and was going to meet Johnson. Suppose he followed her out there, and then got both of them?"

"Swell," said Quayle sarcastically. "Let's reconstruct the crime. Hattingh strangled Mrs. Hattingh. Johnson, who was much more powerfully built than Hattingh, stood by and watched. Maybe he was mesmerized. Perhaps the murderer had picked up a few tricks from this confounded book." He tapped the anthropologist's work. "Still mesmerized, Johnson was persuaded to dress himself in that straw cloak and walk out of the house backwards. Followed by Hattingh, he went into the Evil House and stabbed himself with the spear Hattingh had provided. He let the blood soak into the straw cloak, and then gave it and the spear back to Hattingh. Hattingh took them, went back, and put them in the wood beside Mrs. Hattingh. Then he wandered about until we arrived. And, just to make it difficult for the police, Johnson left off dying until we got there, when he barred the door in our faces."

Quayle was trying to be ferociously funny, but what he said sent an eerie sensation crawling down Peter Blake's spine.

"Then, after he'd killed Johnson, and before we arrived, the murderer went back to the house and pinched a blowpipe and some poisoned darts off the wall in the collection room for his next job."

Judson Holmes lurched forward in his chair. "He what?"

Quayle nodded curtly. "You might as well know. That's why I advised everybody last night to keep their doors locked."

Holmes was mopping his narrow fore-

head. "That means there's going to be another killing. And if my guess about the murderer is right, I'm next on the list! Good-by, everybody!"

"Sit down!" snapped Quayle. "There aren't going to be any more murders!"

Peter ventured a suggestion.

"Just to get it clear in our heads, Inspector, how about making a sort of time chart of the events of last night?"

Quayle stared. "You mean, like in these blasted detective stories? Well, we might do something of the sort, in more or less narrative form." He bent over his notebook, and his pencil flew.

When he had finished, he straightened up.

"Here's how it goes," he said, and read out what he had written. "Johnson starts the ball rolling by throwing out hints about a threat against him, and evidence in his possession that will come to light by Tuesday without fail. He tells Blake, he tells me, and he writes to Judson Holmes. Meanwhile somebody pinches one of his devil masks.

"He conducts a party to the Evil House and Hattingh throws a fit—we know the explanation of that now, anyway. When the party gets back to the house, they discover that somebody has been doing a bit of petty larceny. Among the objects missing are watches. We now know the reason for that, or think we do. Mrs. Hattingh swiped the lot, as a blind, though she was only after the watches. She's preparing for her time alibi. She'd have plenty of opportunity to do it, with everyone dressing and undressing for bathing.

"But someone else has seized the same opportunity and slipped a string of Cowrie shells into Johnson's pocket. That night Johnson rings up Sir Henry Dixon and invites him over. Mr. Blake and Miss Dixon go over to the Hattingh house. Johnny has gone off to town to get cigarettes and Eric is just leaving. Simon Hattingh and his wife drive to town. Completing her alibi, Mrs. Hattingh had doctored the clock, which is now fifteen minutes fast.

"Johnny comes home, notices the clock is wrong, and puts it right. Meanwhile, Mrs. Hattingh never turned up at Miss Epworth's flat. Sir Henry Dixon arrives at Johnson's cottage and gets Chwana's story about Johnson walking out of the house backwards. The time was ten past eight. At eight fifteen Johnny was on his way to the tobacconist's — I checked his story — and went straight home, which doesn't give him much time to kill Mrs. Hattingh and dump her body in Johnson's wood. Eric was still in the house, and Simon and Mrs. Hattingh, had just left, although the clock showed eight-twenty."

QUAYLE took a deep breath. "Here's where we all of us come into it: Sir Henry telephones Johnny and also telephones me. When we all arrive we go out to the ju ju house, and somebody bars the door in our faces. When we break it open, Johnson is dying and there is no one else there. The mud shows no footprints but our own.

"We return to the cottage and find the place ransacked. Someone has put the stolen devil mask back on the wall, but the straw cloak is gone, a spear has been taken, and also a blow-pipe and some poisoned darts. Later, we find Mrs. Hattingh dead in the wood, and beside her the straw cloak, now soaked in blood, and the spear that killed Johnson. The only persons without alibis are Sir Henry Dixon, Simon Hattingh and Judson Holmes."

"I was in my hotel room at eight-ten," observed Holmes mildly. "But I agree that's no alibi. It's a big place, and I could have been in and out half a dozen times and no one the wiser."

"Chwana hasn't an alibi either," said Quayle, "but I don't believe he did it. He was devoted to Johnson, and he didn't know Mrs. Hattingh at all. Now here are some questions:

"Why was the devil mask stolen and then replaced? Who was Mrs. Hattingh planning to meet? Who put the cowrie shells in Johnson's pocket? And what is the explanation of Johnson 'walking backwards' dressed in a straw cloak and how did the murderer get out of the Evil House without leaving any footprints?

"Which brings us," said Quayle grimly, "to this." He picked up Johnson's book. "Oh, yes," he smiled. "I read it through last night. Parts of it are quite suggestive. There's even a pointer to the murderer's identity, although the book was written years ago. Here, let me read you a passage or two."

Quayle thumbed the pages of the fat, eminently respectable looking tome.

"This chapter" he said, "is headed

'Beliefs of the Mechwana.' Johnson says: 'The Mechwana are ruled by the Society of Straw Men. The Straw Men are credited with amazing powers—powers extending over life and death. They are the law-makers, and they are also the judges. The chiefs are, as a rule, merely their puppets. The chief executioner of the Mechwana is, by tradition, always a Straw Man.

" 'The higher grades of the Straw Men are called Ayaka. An Ayaka man is believed to be repository of sensational powers, including that of invisibility or transparency. He may at will pass a staff or spear through his own body, leaving no mark or wound, and he can fade through the walls of huts or buildings, as though either his body or the wall were nothing but vapor.

" 'Whatever one may say to such claims, the witch doctors are capable of amazing feats, some of which I have personally witnessed, and could detect no trick. They handle hot irons, and plunge their hands into boiling cauldrons. They can by some fluid they concoct and force into the body, galvanize a dead man with the movements of seeming life'."

Judson Holmes shrugged. "Balderdash!" he declared. "And you know it, Inspector. But you said the book provided a clue to the murderer. Where is it?"

Quayle laid the book down. "Don't rush me, Mr. Holmes," he said curtly. "All I'm saying now is that if—*if*—you were prepared to believe this stuff, it would explain a lot. It would explain the murderer who wasn't there, and it would explain Johnson walking backwards. Another bit I haven't read to you explains the significance of the cowrie shells—the warning to the victim that the executioner has picked him out for death and will be coming for him. If you believe it, this book explains a lot. On the other hand, that may be precisely the impression that the murderer is trying to create."

"Ah!" Holmes sank back in his chair. He seemed relieved. "That's better, Inspector. You mean, this book was accessible to anyone. They might have read it and staged a murder closely following these lines, knowing that the book would fall into the hands of the police? And by jove, it didn't exactly fall into the police's hands, either, did it? It was thrust there—by Eric Hatttingh."

Quayle nodded. "I hadn't much option except to read it, after what he said. And he knew all about Johnson's death before anyone had told him. . . ."

Holmes agreed. "That young fellow certainly knew too much. But what about this clue to the murderer's identity?"

"Ah, yes," Quayle was urbane. "I'll read it to you."

HE picked up the green book and found his place. " 'The Straw Men were strictly bound by oath not to reveal any of the secrets of their craft. To learn even a few of them I had to become one of their number myself. It is true that I was only an imumu or lower grade man, but even so, I am bound by the oath and must respect it. I can at this time disclose none of the secrets which I have learned. At this date and distance, I am bound by considerations of honor rather than by any compulsion exercised by the Mechwana, yet my readers will pardon me if I am not unmindful of the fact that the oath stipulates that anyone revealing the secrets of the Straw Men should be slain, and that the executioner should be his nearest friend'."

Judson Holmes was on his feet. "You've got a nerve!" he snarled. "Are you accusing me of murdering Johnson?"

"I'm not accusing anyone," said Quayle. "You yourself have suggested that the murderer might have intended us to read this book and draw certain conclusions. It's true, isn't it, that you were Johnson's nearest friend?"

"I was," he admitted. "But we hadn't seen each other for some time. I've just come back from a long Rhodesian trip. And while he was down here Johnson made a few friends—Sir Henry Dixon, for instance."

"So you think it was Sir Henry?"

"I don't think anything. Sir Henry Dixon may have a dozen corpses in his cellar, for all I know, though I don't believe it. But *that's* the sort of wild conclusion you'll jump to, if you take that seriously. I tell you, Johnson wrote that book as a scientific treatise, and nothing else."

"And yet," said Quayle dreamily, "it does explain so many things. But what did Johnson mean when he said he had

certain evidence against the mur—"

He broke off. The door had opened, and Johnny Hattingh appeared on the threshold. His face was red, as though he had been running. Quayle looked sharply at Johnny. "What's the trouble?"

"My father has disappeared," said Johnny simply. "And Eric seems to have vanished, too."

"What do you mean, vanished?" said Quayle. "If they've gone out of town, I distinctly told them not to."

"You know that's not what I mean." Johnny dropped into a chair. "It was this way. We met this morning at breakfast. As you can imagine, we weren't in the mood for conversation. After breakfast I went up to my own room. I hadn't been there long when I heard the car start up—the big car. I didn't think anything of it for a minute. Then suddenly I wondered where the old man could be off to. I ran downstairs, but the car had gone. And when I went to look for Eric, he'd gone too."

Quayle said slowly: "There doesn't seem to be anything very alarming about that."

Johnny hesitated. "I went into Eric's room," he blurted out at last. "As I say, he was gone. But this was lying on his table."

He put on Quayle's desk a string to which cowrie shells had been tied.

They all stared at the grotesque little symbol of death. All through their conference, the silence from the empty street outside had been unbroken. But now the quiet was shattered.

From close at hand a woman screamed in sheer terror; and Peter Blake recognized his fiancée's voice.

VII

JUST at ten-thirty, Ann Dixon started to walk into town. Ever since a certain suspicion had seized on her imagination the night before she had been aching to have an interview with her father. That interview was now over and Ann felt ashamed of herself.

He answered frankness with frankness. "Ann," he said seriously, "I could see that question in your mind last night, when Quayle objected that Patricia Hattingh couldn't have gone to Johnson's cottage, because it was too far. Had the vampire by some ghastly chance got her claws into me? Well, Ann, she hadn't. I don't want to speak ill of the dead, so I'm not going to go into whether she tried any games with *me*. But I can give you my word that she didn't come here last night, and that I never saw her again after that afternoon at Johnson's."

Shortly afterwards, Sir Henry had left the house; and searching, Ann had discovered that Peter was nowhere about. She felt frustrated, because she had wanted to talk things over with him. She stayed in the house for a while, listlessly. But finally, making up her irresolute mind, she pulled on a hat and went as briskly as the heat allowed down the road into the town. She had a shrewd idea where she would find Peter.

The town, when she reached it, was sunbaked and empty. She passed closed and shuttered shops. A petrol pump outside a garage looked like some lost symbol of a Twentieth Century Pompeii. Snouts of cars glittered in the show window while in a furniture shop a sleeping kitten was curled on a fat divan. One shop only showed signs of life. Behind the window of the undertaking establishment a faint light glowed and a shadow moved against black draperies.

It was at this point that Ann began to feel uneasy. The street was too empty, and the click of her heels on the pavement was too loud. Half consciously she began calculating the distance to the police station, her destination, and her footsteps quickened. She did not want to look back over her shoulder, at the undertaker's.

"This is absurd," said Ann to herself, and then she nearly cried out.

About fifty yards ahead of her, beside the bulk of the post office, a figure had appeared out of a lane. It turned with a slow and mechanical precision, until it was facing in the same direction as she was, with its back turned to her; and it began to stump along slowly in front of her.

Before it turned, she had caught a glimpse of the red face; and the long black raincoat and the hat that seemed too big for the head told her that it was Eric Hattingh.

From the first moment of his appearance she was afraid. He must have heard her footsteps echoing loudly in

the empty street, but he did not turn his head. Also, there was something odd about the way he walked.

"He should be walking backwards," thought Ann, and felt mounting hysteria grip her throat. She cried out to break the spell.

"Mr. Hattingh! Eric!"

He must have heard her; but still he stumped steadily on. She pulled herself together. "This won't do!" she thought. "I am *not* sharing this street with a walking corpse. He just hasn't heard me." She made up her mind to catch up with him, but before she could quicken her steps the figure turned sharply to the right, mounted the shallow steps to the post office noiselessly and with stiff mechanical strides, disappeared into the building.

Ann broke into a run. It took her about thirty seconds to reach the post office. When she reached the broad entrance she realized that, like everything else in Marathon, the building was closed for the day.

The post office had a broad entrance hall, and there were no other doors. This hall was always open. In the center of the back wall was a clock, and underneath the clock were two telephone booths, with, in between them, a stamp machine. On either side of the hall were glass double doors. The doors to the right opened into the public part of the building, the doors to the left to a corridor which led to the parcel department, and then to a warren of rooms where the sorting and other duties were performed.

The entrance hall was a marble emptiness. Eric Hattingh had vanished. She tried the doors at one end, and they were fast. The doors beyond which the empty corridor stretched were equally firm.

Mechanically, her eyes went to the clock; the hands pointed to eleven. Then her eyes came down, and she looked at the telephone booths. One was empty; Eric Hattingh was in the other. He had his back to her, and the instrument was tightly clenched in one hand. He did not seem to be speaking, and he stood very stiff and straight. His head was bent at a curiously awkward angle.

But now she could see something else, and fear welled up in her again. With the greatest effort, she crossed the marble floor, laid a hand on the knob of the booth door, and pulled. As the door opened, Eric Hattingh tilted back, falling with a dull thud on the marble floor. Something was sticking out of the side of his neck.

Ann screamed.

* * * * *

MR. RANDALL, Marathon's undertaker, sat in Quayle's office. "Gave me quite a turn, I can tell you," he said. "I was sitting in my office, going over some overdue accounts, when my telephone rang. I picked it up, and I said, 'Hullo. Randall here. Who is speaking?'

"And the voice said: 'I want you to bring me a coffin.' Well, I've had that sort of joke played on me before. So I said, speaking sharp, 'You do, do you? And might I ask who's to be buried in it?'

" 'I am,' he says. 'I've just died. I want a coffin.'

" 'Right-o," I said, turning sarcastic, to show him he couldn't scare me. 'What's your name?'

" 'Eric Hattingh,' he said.

"Then there was a sort of glugging noise, like somebody choking. I yelled to ask what was wrong, but I got no answer. And so I thought it over and decided I'd better bring the matter to you."

"I want you to think carefully, Mr. Randall," said Inspector Quayle. "What time was this?" And the little undertaker broke into a crow of pleased laughter.

"Why, Inspector, I anticipated you'd ask that question; and I'll bet you think I'm going to mumble 'Let-me-see.' But I'm not. For before the phone went I had just been looking at my watch, thinking it was time for a cup of tea. It was just before eleven o'clock!"

But that interview took place later.

When the men heard Ann scream, the first one out of the door was Van Niekerk. The others followed at his heels, across the lane to the post office.

In a moment, Ann was in Peter's arms, trembling like a leaf. He murmured incoherent words into her ear but out of the corner of his eye he saw the whole scene. Eric Hattingh lay on his back, on the marble floor. The dart stuck out at an ugly angle from his neck. Quayle knelt beside him, while Van Niekerk pushed his way into the telephone booth.

"We'll have to wait for the doctor," said Quayle grimly. "But I should say he's been dead for some time."

Peter felt the girl jerk taut in his arms. "No!" she cried. "He was alive! He must have been! You see, I followed him in here, only a moment ago. He—he was walking queerly."

They stared at her through a long moment, and Ann put her hands before her face. "Now, now!" said Quayle. "Ghosts don't walk at eleven in the morning. No." He was rubbing his chin. "I've a notion how this might have been managed."

He strode to the double glass doors leading into the public part of the post office, seized the handles, and shook them. The door did not budge. Quayle turned and crossed to the doors at the other side. He peered into the dim corridor, and shook the doors. They did not open. Then he raised a fist and beat on the glass. "Hoy!" he roared.

They heard an agitated shuffle of footsteps, one half of the doors clicked open and a man appeared. He was a little bald man, in a pair of disreuptable flannels. He peered up at them through thick spectacles. He was very short-sighted, and he seemed to see nothing amiss. In any case, Quayle was standing screening the body.

"Here!" began the little man indignantly. Then he peered again, and recognized the inspector.

Quayle wasted no words. "Urquhart, did anybody come through here in the last few minutes?"

The bald man gaped. "Oh, it's you, Inspector. You mean through this door? No. We keep it locked on the inside. Besides, it's a holiday. Why?"

"Never mind why," Quayle told him. "Where were you?"

"Upstairs. I'm sorting out the mail for tomorrow."

"Then someone could have come through, without you knowing?"

He shook his head. "I tell you, the door was locked. You saw for yourself. It only opens on the inside."

"How long have you been here?"

"I've just come in."

"Did you get in this way?"

"No. The back way. That's open. But what—Oh!" Quayle had indavertently moved and the little man's eyes, magnified by the thick spectacles, were fixed on Eric.

"Ever seen him before?" demanded Quayle.

THE bald man peered, gulped, and nodded. "That's Mr. Eric Hattingh. He sometimes inquired for letters. How did he—?" He pointed, but said no more.

Johnny moved to the inspector's side. He was excited. "Inspector, I've got an idea." He turned to the bald man. "Did you say you were sorting mail?" he demanded.

Urquhart nodded. "That's right," he said. "You're Mr. Hattingh, too, aren't you?" He was suddenly consumed with curiosity. "That's funny. I could have sworn I saw your father, round the back, not ten minutes ago. He was walking up the street as I came in." The little man's weak eyes widened. "Hey! You don't mean that whoever did that may be in here, with me?"

"If he was, he's got away by now," said Quayle wearily. "What's your idea, Johnny?"

"Come on!" said Johnny. "I may be completely dippy, but it's worth a try. Let's search the building."

They left Van Niekerk to await the doctor.

Inspector Quayle led the way along the corridor. The bald man kept in the rear, alternately giving nervous directions and peering over his shoulder. Halfway along the corridor, before they came to the parcels department, a door stood half open. At the bald man's instruction, they went through it, and up a stairway. The sorters' department was a large bare room, with big windows through which they could see the main street below them, hot dusty and empty. The room ran the whole length of the building, and at the other end the windows looked down on the street that ran parallel with the main street. It was equally deserted.

Quayle turned to Johnny. "Nobody here," he said. "What do we do next? Go down again?"

Johnny shook his head. He spoke to the bald man. "You were sorting mail. How far had you got?"

Urquhart considered. "How far had I got?" he repeated. "I don't do them alphabetically, but by districts. I'd got rid of—"

"Never mind." Johnny's voice was eager. "Look," he pursued, "if any-

thing was missing out of the lot you've done— When did you do them, by the way?"

"I did most of 'em early this morning," said the little man promptly. "Then I went out for a breather. I can take my own time, so long as I get the job done."

"So you hadn't tackled many since you got back? If anything had been taken since you went out, would you know?"

Urquhart looked alarmed. "D'you mean he was up *here?*"

"He might have been," said Johnny. "That's what we want to find out." He turned back to the inspector. "Look here, Quayle. Don't think I'm dippy. But you remember what Johnson said about the evidence he'd planted somewhere, so that it would be bound to come to light on *Tuesday?* Well, suppose he had mailed it to somebody? And remember, there was no mail today, because it's a holiday. So the murderer would get a full two days' grace, and Johnson said he had set a time-limit."

Quayle was galvanized into action. Under his direction, the bewildered Urquhart sorted out all the mail addressed to Sir Henry Dixon, Eric, Johnny, Quayle and Johnson himself—for Johnny, still hot on the scent, pointed out that the anthropologist might have employed that ruse.

They divided it up and went through it rapidly. Johnny took his own lot and Eric's. In a moment he had tossed the slim bundle marked "Hattingh" down disgustedly. "Nothing here."

Quayle threw his bundle down. "Just ordinary letters."

"There's nothing in Johnson's lot," said Peter.

They stared at each other. Quayle paced the floor, and while he was doing so another figure slipped unobtrusively into the big room.

It was Mafuti Xosa. "Sergeant Van Niekerk asked me to report, sir. The doctor is here." He glanced uncertainly at Johnny. "Death is sleep," he said gently.

"Stay here, Xosa," Quayle told the Bantu. "None of this mail is to be moved. It's just possible that Johnson sent a letter to someone else." He stopped, and then said awkwardly: "Oh! There wasn't anything for your father, Johnny?"

Johnny shook his head slowly.

"Ah, well!" said Quayle briskly. "Didn't think there would be. Of course we'll check up on that idea of yours, Johnny, but it begins to look as though Johnson put that evidence elsewhere."

AT nine o'clock that night, Peter answered the telephone. Quayle spoke low. "Blake? I need help. If Johnny Hattingh means what he says, we're going to trap the murderer tonight. He may be out of his mind but I'm going to take a chance on it. Can you be at the station within half an hour?"

Peter hesitated. Then he said, "All right." He knew in outline what had happened since that morning's tragedy. He knew that Eric had died of a poisoned dart, one of the darts from Johnson's collection. The doctor did not think the blowpipe had been used. He also knew that Simon Hattingh was still missing.

They were waiting for him outside the police station. Quayle came forward eagerly. "Good man!" he said. "This is Johnny's idea. He says he's going to explain, but not right now. And he says we're each to have one of these." He thrust an automatic into Peter's hand.

Johnny's voice was grim and tense. "I'm not trying to be mysterious," he said. "But I think we're going to get the murderer. That idea of mine this morning was wrong; Quayle had the whole of the mail searched: nothing. Which leaves only one alternative. I know where Johnson's evidence is hidden but I think the murderer knows too." He turned to the inspector. "We'll take your car."

"We're in your hands, Johnny," said Quayle.

Johnny drove, and it was soon evident where they were going. "Look here," Quayle protested. "We searched Johnson's cottage thoroughly, and we found nothing."

"You did what I asked you? You had the guards removed?"

Quayle nodded. "The place is empty. I even had Chwana, the native servant, cleared off to the location."

At a point where they could see Johnson's cottage, Johnny ran the car softly into the side of the road, and switched off the engine. He leaned back in the driver's seat and groped for cigarettes.

When he found them he handed the case round, lit his own, and inhaled deeply.

"Ever since last night," he said, "impossible things have been happening. Men have walked backwards; devil masks have vanished; a corpse has walked in broad daylight down the main street. In addition, we've been bedeviled by quotations from a book on African wizardry that really seemed to contain an explanation of the whole series of mysteries.

"As Judson Holmes pointed out, if you once decided that you could believe in the supernatural powers of the Straw Men, then you could explain the whole thing. But at the same time, we've also had the feeling, that in some way we were being hoodwinked and tricked by a master mummer.

"If we believe that, then only certain conclusions are possible. First, some of the witnesses have been lying, and some at least of these bizarre events never happened at all. For instance, suppose Ann never really saw Eric walking into the post office in that horrid fashion she's described, but instead saw something very different, though none the less horrible to her?"

Peter felt his muscles tighten. The same thought had occurred to him.

"We know," continued Johnny inexorably, "that Sir Henry Dixon was not in his house for a large part of the morning. He says himself that he went out shortly before Ann. He adds that he just went for a walk, and that he met no one. But suppose he really went into town, by another route than Ann, and much faster? And suppose it was he Ann saw, going up into the post office just before she found Eric dead inside.

"That's what I mean when I say that perhaps some of the odd happenings can be explained away by supposing that in fact they never occurred at all. Unfortunately for that theory, we ourselves witnessed the oddest one of all. We stood outside the Evil House, and heard the door being barred in our faces. We ourselves broke it down, and found no one. Therefore it's reasonable to conclude that the other things really happened also. None of the witnesses was lying, and we've got to look for another explanation."

Peter let his breath out in a long quiet sigh of relief.

"I've been puzzling this thing over and around," continued Johnny. "And, remember, I'm the one who's most affected. Of the three victims, one was my step-mother and one was my brother. So perhaps I've had a bigger incentive than any of you, even than Quayle, to get to the truth and unmask the murderer.

"Well, I think I've done it. I can't explain all the puzzle but I can explain most of it. I can explain all the 'supernatural' happenings. I can even explain that telephone call to the undertaker, and I think I know why Johnson was seen walking backwards."

Johnny took a final puff of his cigarette. "But I don't know yet what the motive was, and I hope I'm wrong about the identity of the killer. And now," he said quietly, "while we're waiting for the murderer, I'll tell you my theory."

VIII

STORM clouds moved glutinously across the sky. Johnny drew a long breath. "Well, here goes," he said. "We'd got it worked out that it was Patricia who pinched the watches yesterday morning. We also figured that she did it so that she could meet someone without my father knowing of it. I think all that is quite right, even though I still don't believe she was having an affair with Johnson. But I do think Johnson was the person she intended to meet. Not so that he could make love to her but, prompted by something she had previously found out, so that she could warn him. The finding of the cowrie shells merely hardened her resolve. She hadn't put them there, but perhaps she knew who had."

It was all adding up. "Simon," resumed Johnny, "insisted from the first that Patricia had gone to see Johnson. But the objection has been raised that Simon dropped her too far away from Johnson's cottage for her to have walked there, seen Johnson, and got back, all in fifteen minutes. Well, that's simple enough, isn't it? Johnson had a car. And if Patricia had phoned him, saying that she had to see him, he could have motored into town, and picked her up.

"I don't think Patricia meant to come to the cottage at all. I think the idea was for Johnson to run into town,

where she could have a secret talk with him, and still keep her date with Susan Epworth. Only it didn't turn out that way. You see, the murderer met her instead. She was killed, strangled, in the town."

"But," said Quayle. "That means—"

"Let me go on," said Johnny. "With Patricia's dead body in his car, the murderer drove straight out to Johnson's. Before he went into the cottage, he dumped Patricia's body in the bushes, where it was found later. Then he went in to see Johnson. He had previously stolen the devil mask that was missing from the collection room."

"Why?" said Quayle.

"Remember the cowrie shells," said Johnny. "The devil mask was an earlier gambit in the same game. It was part of a plan to get Johnson thoroughly frightened. It belonged to the same—phase—of the murderer's mental state. But now he had taken a further step along the road he was treading. He had killed, and he meant to kill again."

Johnny paused. "I'm getting ahead of my story. The murderer went into the cottage and told Johnson that he had taken the devil mask—as a joke. Returning the devil mask got him into the collection room and got Johnson there too. Then when Johnson was putting the mask back on the wall, the killer struck again. He smashed the glass case, and snatched out the spear that lay there, and thrust the spear into Johnson."

"Hold on!" said Quayle suddenly. "Why that spear? The room, heaven knows, was full of other weapons, much readier to hand."

"He wanted the cloak in the glass case," said Johnny. "He needed the straw cloak as well as the spear. Oh, the killer had it all thought out! He meant to take Johnson to the Evil House; there was no poetry or purpose in his revenge if the body wasn't found there. And he didn't want blood in the house, or on himself. That spear caused a huge wound.

"As Johnson fell, he caught him. And he pulled that long straw cloak over Johnson's body. If any blood got on the floor, he wiped it up quickly, before it could stain. Then he carried his victim out. But before he left the collection room he took the poisoned darts; for his work was not finished yet.

"He picked up Johnson, and because Johnson had been stabbed in the chest, and he didn't want blood on his own clothes, he carried Johnson on his back, and facing away from him. He had scarcely started when Chwana came in. That must have given him a turn! But he would not abandon his purpose. He staggered on into the darkened hall, and out into the drive; and Johnson's feet dragged on the ground as the murderer walked.

"And that is what Chwana saw. In one flash of lightning he saw Johnson, dressed in that straw cloak, and seeming to walk backwards. But he didn't see the murderer!"

QUAYLE drew a long breath. "It fits! But stop! The hardest bit is still to come. Johnny, if you can explain what happened at the Evil House, when we arrived there, you can have my job."

Johnny grinned. "Surely that's simple enough. The murderer got Johnson to the Evil House, because Chwana didn't even attempt to follow him. He put Johnson on the floor—thinking he was dead. But before he went he stripped off the straw cloak, now all bloody, and with that and the spear he went back the way he came. He left them beside Patricia's body and finally he went away.

"But Johnson wasn't dead. Nine-tenths of him was dead but there was a spark of life that refused to go out. When we arrived, that dull spark of life was still in his brain—and he heard us.

"And he heard his murderer coming back.

"Johnson could have had no idea of the passage of time. He didn't know how long the killer had been gone. Perhaps he thought it was only a few minutes. And now he heard the murderer coming back, to finish him off."

"How?" asked Quayle abruptly.

Johnny explained. "Don't you remember that one of us shouted Johnson's name across the clearing; shouted curses at him. Johnson recognized the murderer's voice. He summoned up the last of his strength, dragged his dying body across the floor, and put down the bar. That was the scraping, shuffling sound we heard. And then, too late, he heard our voices, knew that help was at hand. But the murderer was there too! In a last paroxysm, he tried to pull

himself up by the pole, but he hadn't strength enough left to call out. And then he collapsed, finally, this time; except that, when the police surgeon raised his head, he looked at the murderer he didn't have the strength to name, before he died."

Johnny stopped; and Peter knew that he and Quayle were thinking the same thing. They looked at Johnny with compassion.

"The murderer wasn't finished." Johnny's tone was flat and dispassionate. "He had taken the poisoned darts. I don't know who his next victim was meant to be. But whether he had already chosen Eric or not, Eric crossed his path, and was struck down.

"On the night of the murders, we all heard about the evidence which Johnson said he had prepared against a certain person. The murderer had to get hold of that evidence, only he hadn't the faintest notion of where it was. He had already searched the cottage for it in vain, after killing Johnson. Now he had to get it, because Johnson had boasted that it would come to light by Tuesday at the latest.

"The murderer had only a day to work in. He knew it hadn't been sent to the police—but who had it? Where was it? And then he remembered. Monday — today — was a public holiday. What was it that would stay hidden Sunday and Monday, but come to light without fail Tuesday? A letter, of course, posted on Saturday night."

"But we searched," protested Quayle. "We didn't find anything."

"The murderer had found it first," said Johnny. He knew where it would be, and that only one man would be on duty at the post office; and if the worst came to the worst, he had the poisoned darts. And Eric got exactly the same notion. He went to the post office—and met the murderer.

"The killer got in the back way; and either before or shortly afterwards, Eric went in too. So the murderer struck again. I think he meant to repeat his former technique, and take the body away in his car. Then he glanced out of the window and saw something that gave him his most brilliant and his craziest idea. He saw Ann Dixon coming along a deserted street.

"He stripped off Eric's coat and hat, and put them on. Then he carried the body to the front hall. He opened the door which locked from the inside, went into the hall, rang up Randall the undertaker, and 'asked for a coffin,' as Randall has described.

"Then he went back the way he had come, out of the back of the building, and around into the main street. He appeared some yards in front of Ann, and, taking care not to give her more than a glimpse of his face, turned and walked ahead of her in that mechanical, wooden way she has described to us. He marched up the steps into the post office, knowing that he had established in the mind of yet another witness that the Devil was abroad in Marathon.

"He whipped off the coat and hat, put them on Eric, and jammed the body in the telephone booth, putting the receiver in Eric's hand. When the door was closed, Eric was held upright. He went once again through the door, which he had left open, but this time he shut it. And he went out the back way, just missing Urquhart, and escaped."

"I believe you've got it," said Quayle slowly. "Except the motive. And—Johnny, how could you bring yourself to tell us all this? The man who shouted at the Evil House, and the man whom Urquhart saw at the post office, was—"

They heard the footsteps in the roadway, light and sharp, and coming towards them.

"There you are!" Ann was breathing hard, as though she had been running. "Peter—Johnny—Inspector Quayle? I thought I should find you here."

"Ann!" Peter opened the door of the car. "How did you know we were here?"

"I guessed it," said Ann simply. "And when I saw my father sneaking out of the house, and coming this way, I was sure."

"Sir Henry!" snapped Quayle. "He came here? Where is he now?"

"Look!" said Johnny, "the murderer is loose again!"

In the bulk of the dead man's cottage, they saw a light spring up. A shadow passed across the drawn blinds of the living room. They were looking at the murderer.

IX

WITH a quick movement, Quayle had drawn a gun from his pocket. "Come on," he said.

They stepped off the road on to the

grass and began to approach the cottage obliquely through the trees. Nearer and nearer they crept, apprehensive of every twig that cracked underfoot. But the shadow had gone and the cottage continued to show no more sign of life than that single lighted window. Peter found himself wondering where Sir Henry Dixon was. Ann had said he had come here. He remembered, too, that they had not seen Judson Holmes since the afternoon.

They were nearing the end of cover now. Presently they would have to cross the last bare stretch of lawn that separated them from the front door.

"We'll cross together," whispered Quayle. "It's safer." He hesitated and glanced at Peter and the girl. "Better if you two stay here. Johnny and I will do it."

"No," said Ann quickly. "I'm coming, too. I must. I—I want to see."

Then they were running across the lawn, heads down, scurrying like rabbits. They reached the front door in a bunch, cowered in the shadow of the porch, and listened. Nothing stirred.

What was the murderer doing?

Quayle put his hand on the knob of the door. He told them by signs that they were to wait, then threw open the door and ducked inside. They saw the door swing back, and he was gone, inside the hall and crouching against the side wall.

The hall itself was in darkness, but the door of the living room was ajar. They could not see inside, but all knew that the room had an unseen occupant. Somewhere out of their line of vision the murderer was waiting.

And then the man in the room came out. He walked slowly and stiffly, with the appearance of a clockwork figure and his eyes were fixed on a paper he held in his right hand.

Quayle straightened himself from his crouching position. He began to cross the hall.

"Good evening, Mr. Hattingh," he said, "Er—what have you got there?"

"This!" Simon Hattingh showed no curiosity about their presence. "This nonsense, Inspector, is the most thunderous, libelous rubbish I have ever read. The man must have been out of his mind!"

As he waved the paper, his other hand was slipping casually towards his pocket, as though to produce a handkerchief or cigarettes.

"Look out, Quayle!" Johnny shouted. "Don't let him fool you!"

SIMON HATTINGH jerked back as though he had been physically shoved. A gleam from the room light fell like a bar across his eyes, which mirrored a writhing volcano of mad rage and sudden insane comprehension. He screamed, a high, thin, horrible sound; and there was froth bubbling at the corner of his mouth. Beads of perspiration shone on Quayle's high forehead as he took one step nearer.

"Mr. Hattingh, I—"

But Simon was beyond the reach of reason. The brain had cracked. He snarled at Quayle like a dog. His hand jerked out of his pocket. In those few tense seconds, Quayle had allowed the madman to come too near. A vicious blow crumpled the policeman as if he had been a rag doll. Then Simon was looming over him, snarling, and in his hand was a gun. His finger grew white as it pressed on the trigger.

Quayle jerked his head aside and simultaneously he fired from his pocket. Simon Hattingh's hand gripping his gun sagged. The whole arm sank down until it was at his side. The gun clattered to the floor. Simon Hattingh lifted his other arm and pressed a hand to his side. Before he fell, dead, they saw his eyes again and they were no longer mad.

They seemed merely surprised.

The paper he had been holding had fluttered across the hall. Quayle scrambled to his feet, snatched it up and quickly scanned it.

"This clinches matters, Johnny. You were right. This is Maxwell Johnson's message, and he says—"

But Johnny was kneeling beside his father. His voice was a snarl. "Never mind what Johnson says!"

He brushed an unsteady hand across a wet face. Quayle put an arm about the young man's shoulder.

"Okay, Johnny," he said quietly. "I know the way you feel. But better this way than—"

He left the sentence unfinished but they all knew what he had been going to say. If Simon Hattingh had not hanged, he would have ended his miserable days in a criminal lunatic asylum.

THEY did what had to be done. Quayle rang for the ambulance, and summoned Van Niekerk. Johnny laid a handkerchief across the staring eyes of his father. Then Sir Henry Dixon came in, accompanied by Mafuti Xosa, the Bantu detective.

Sir Henry took in the scene at a glance. "Heard the shot," he said briefly. "Oh, yes, I was lurkin' around. Thought something might happen here. Ann, you do get into the thick of it, don't you?"

Xosa padded softly across to Quayle, and said something to him. Quayle appeared perplexed.

The Bantu looked round the hall, then down at the body of Simon Hattingh, and round at all their faces. He nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"It is finished," he said.

They had gone into Maxwell Johnson's living-room; all except Mafuti Xosa, who had slipped away again, presumably on some errand for Quayle. "From now on," the Inspector said, "we shall be intensely busy. I won't be able to leave for Pretoria tomorrow, after all."

Suddenly Peter Blake laughed. "Sorry," he said lamely, "but I've just remembered something that has been troubling me. It was about Tuesday, and Johnson saying he would be safe by then, and someone saying they were going away on that day. I couldn't recall who, or why. So it was Quayle, with his police conference in Pretoria."

Quayle chuckled. "You mean you suspected me? Well, I've been mixed up in a few murder cases, and in a variety of roles, but never before as a suspect!"

"Sorry," Peter mumbled.

"Nothing to be sorry about," said Sir Henry Dixon briskly. "I imagine we have all been suspecting each other at one time or another stage of this affair. For example, I have a strong notion that a certain young woman was dismally wondering about her father while, for a time, I myself strongly suspected Johnny here. . . ."

"I say!" said Johnny.

Sir Henry smiled. "Yes, I thought Johnny's alibi was much too good. It struck me as the sort of thing you only come across in books, and when you do, you know the murderer. I was convinced that Johnny had cunningly contrived to be in two places at once, so that when he was talking to Levinson, the tobacconist, he was at the same time stabbing Johnson. Though I confess the question of motive baffled me."

"We all get these notions," said Quayle. "You'd be surprised at the names I've been putting on the murderer."

Quayle was still fingering the paper that had fluttered from Simon Hattingh's dying grasp, while on his knee was a long buff envelope. Across it was typed in capitals: FOR THE POLICE. They had found it on the table, torn open.

"Maxwell Johnson's message," said Quayle reflectively.

"But how could it have been here?" asked Peter, puzzled. "I thought we had decided that Johnson had posted the evidence against Hattingh, so that it would come to light on Tuesday—tomorrow—morring? And that the murderer had got hold of it this afternoon, when he met and killed Eric because Eric had guessed where the paper was?"

"Quite right," nodded Quayle, "and that is what happened. But—I'm indebted to Johnny for this—Maxwell Johnson was too smart a man to leave his fate resting on one message. He actually wrote two; so that if the murderer did succeed in putting him out of the way, and also destroying one message, the other would be there to trip him up. The murderer guessed that Johnson might have done something like that; he had searched the cottage that first time, but hurriedly, and he couldn't be sure. Johnny guessed that his fears wouldn't let him rest until he had undertaken another, more thorough search. And he was right."

Johnny nodded. "That's how I figured it. If I had done those killings I wouldn't rest until I had searched Johnson's house again."

Quayle looked down at the paper. He appeared pensive.

"This was dynamite," he said slowly, "and the murderer knew it. That's why he killed Johnson in the first place. Johnson told me that the evidence he had against the person who was threatening him was not of a 'criminal nature;' but it was far worse than that for the murderer. It was a picture of the murderer's mind." They were leaning forward now, waiting breathlessly. "I'm going to read it out to you,"

Quayle went on. "That is if Johnny will permit. It's not pretty."

Johnny shrugged. "Oh, go ahead. I'd like to know, for one, if Johnson had reached the conclusion I think he had about my father."

"Yes. Very well, then."

INSPECTOR QUAYLE cleared his throat and commenced:

"'If and when the police, to whom this is addressed, ever read it, I, Maxwell Johnson, will be dead. And if I am killed, I fear that others may follow, for once he has started, the murderer will not be content with one victim. It is to protect those other possible victims that I now write what I know about Simon Hattingh.

"'The man is mad. I think it began in Mechwanaland, after an experience which Judson Holmes, whom I have summoned here, will relate to the police if they ask him. That experience turned Hattingh's brain. It has been slowly rotting ever since, and the sight of me here has, I fear, hastened Hattingh's mental decay. I know that his mad mind has conceived the fantastic notion that I am his wife's lover! I know, too, from other symptoms that Hattingh's malady is now entering a definitely dangerous phase.

"'The theft of the devil mask is no coincidence. He is brooding on the business in Mechwanaland. I saved his life so I must die! And I should not be surprised if I am to be "executed" in the Mechwana manner; the precise death from which I saved him. He has taken the mask. Will he come back for the executioner's ax? If he does, I shall know what to expect. He might even give me the official warning. I shall know what it means if I am shortly presented with a string of cowrie shells.

"'Perhaps if I take Hattingh to the replica of the Evil House which Chwana and I have built. It will stampede him into showing his hand.

"'Meanwhile I am taking the precaution of letting him know by a few pointed hints what I suspect about his mental condition. I intend to let him know that I am posting to Sir Henry Dixon this week-end a letter similar to this, so that at least two of us will be on our guard against him. I shall, however, point out to him that the letter will not reach its destination until Tuesday morning, and that if he returns my devil mask, and gives me suitable guarantees in writing against an early demise, I shall recall the letter.

"'On second thought, I think I'd better not tell him how I intend to convey this information, or to whom. He is a cunning devil, and might use the time-limit to forestall me. No; I shall merely tell him that I have written something and that it is bound to come to light by Tuesday at the latest. That may frighten him into returning the devil mask, and giving me the guarantee I want. Once he had committed himself in writing, he would not dare to take action against me. For both our sakes, I hope he does what I shall ask. If he does not, the letter reaches Sir Henry. In that case, this statement will never reach the hands of the police. If it is ever read, it will mean that my plan failed, and that Hattingh was able to carry out his purpose. But at least Justice will claim him.'"

Quayle laid down the paper; and Johnny sighed.

"Yes," he said. "I thought it would be something like that. I'd suspected the same thing—about my father's mental condition. I never suspected he was as bad as he was; or I'd have taken action myself."

"After the first murders," said Quayle slowly, "you must have known."

"He was my father," said Johnny simply. "You know, we didn't get on so badly. He—he had a soft spot for me. And in spite of the shabby way he treated her, he really was mad about Patricia. I thought at one time that marriage might change him. So when the murders happened, at first I didn't know what to believe. But afterwards, when Eric was killed, it was simply forced on my attention. He and Eric left the house about the same time."

There was a long silence. They were thinking about Simon Hattingh, enigmatic, old-womanish, watching his wife, watching Maxwell Johnson, the man who had once saved his life and whom he hated most; and of Hattingh, as part of a carefully planned act, shaking his fist at the Evil House and shrieking curses at the dying man, who, he well knew, lay inside.

They thought of the things they had not seen but could imagine with too dreadful clarity. Hattingh driving his

wife into town on the Sunday night, and suddenly strangling her to death, because she suspected him and threatened to thwart his schemes. Hattingh driving over to the cottage with his wife's dead body beside him, and handing over the devil mask to Johnson, agreeing to the anthropologist's demand for a statement that would act as Johnson's insurance policy, and then suddenly snatching the spear from the case and striking his companion down. Hattingh staggering out to the Evil House with the body of his second victim. Hattingh confronted by his son, and frenziedly making his third kill. And finally Hattingh here in the cottage, caught with Johnson's incriminating statement in his hand.

Sir Henry Dixon shuddered. "It doesn't bear thinking about," he said. "But it has ended the best way, better than if he had lived."

Inspector Jeremy Quayle was hunched up in his chair, a grotesquely thin and, somehow, melancholy figure. The brown eyes were brooding, and when he spoke, his voice contained a dreadful fatigue.

"No," he said moodily. "No. The case of the Straw Men isn't all over yet. Not quite. I've sent for Judson Holmes. Van Nickerk's bringing him. When he comes, I'll tell you the real truth."

X

THE flat of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Blake was on the seventeenth floor of one of those modern blocks that dominate the heart of Johannesburg. The evening was warm and they sat on their balcony enjoying the view. Their visitor placed his glass carefully on the balcony's edge, sighed. "Ah!" he said. "You've got a nice place here."

"Stop hedging, Quayle," said Peter. "When you haven't been commenting on the joys of early married life, you've been babbling inanely about the virtues of our view. You know very well that isn't what we want you to talk about. We want to know how you did it!"

Quayle massaged his long chin with a thin white hand. "Ah, but I promised myself that this would be a holiday," he protested. "I want to forget crime, especially that crime. I've been mixed up in a few queer businesses, but that was the worst."

Ann shuddered. "Yes. It was horrible. I still find it difficult to believe—"

She left the sentence unfinished.

"He might have got away with it," said Peter. "I can't understand yet how he didn't. He was diabolically clever."

Quayle shook his head. "It was we who were dull. Like all criminals, he made mistakes, and his mistakes were glaring. But in a way, it wasn't his fault. He was fighting against time—killing against the clock, you might almost say. And from the first his plans went wrong. He had to alter his plans continually to fit circumstances that changed beyond his control."

Peter nodded. "I think I know what you mean," he said. "I've got a sort of misty picture of what must have really happened, but there are big gaps. I think it would be better for our peace of mind, Quayle, if you filled them in. Then the ghost of the Straw Men will be really laid at last."

Quayle brooded. He was back in that room in Johnson's cottage, weeks ago, and the murderer was still brazening it out. . . .

Johnny had been the first to break the silence. He thrust his head forward, and they could see a vein begin to beat in his forehead. When he spoke, his voice was on a curious high note that made the rest glance at him in sharp wonder.

"You mean—I've been wrong? That my father wasn't guilty—?"

"Look here, Quayle!" Sir Henry Dixon, too, seemed bewildered. "We caught Simon Hattingh here—at least you did—red-handed. And now he's dead. Why all this mystification?"

Quayle did not answer Sir Henry's question. He went off at a tangent. "How did it happen that you were hanging about the cottage just when the fireworks started?"

Sir Henry shrugged. "I had a notion you fellows were up to something. I called at the station, but you were gone, Quayle. It occurred to me that you might have come down here to search for something. I followed."

Quayle nodded, but before any of the others could put a question, Judson Holmes came into the room. He addressed Quayle with a certain defiance. "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Mr. Holmes." The inspector's voice was quiet as he held out the en-

velope with Johnson's typed statement in it.

Holmes took it and began to read without a word.

Quayle tapped monotonously on the arm rest of his chair. The tension steadily mounted. It was a relief when wind suddenly sighed over the cottage, and they heard the trees bend and creak in the gust. A moment later the rain came, beating fiercely at the window. There was a distant rumble, followed immediately by a nearer crash, and lightning flashed over the sea.

But their nerves were still unsteady enough for them all to jump when someone knocked at the door. Mafuti Xosa came in, and under his arm he carried a heavy box which he put on the table in front of the inspector. He retired to a corner, but did not leave the room.

They eyed the box curiously. It was about three feet long and a foot high but its plain exterior gave no clue as to what its contents might be.

Judson Holmes lowered the typewritten sheet. Quayle leaned forward:

"Well?"

Holmes' manner was curiously hesitant. "What's the game, Inspector?" he countered.

"I asked you what you thought of that statement," said Quayle sharply.

JUDSON HOLMES continued to look doubtful. "I'd say it was a pretty probable account," he replied at last. "I could believe every word of it—except for one thing."

"Indeed," said Quayle politely. "And what's that?"

Holmes licked his thin lips. "I can't prove this, mind—but Maxwell Johnson never wrote that."

"What makes you think not?"

"It's difficult to put into words. But you've reminded me once or twice that I was Johnson's closest friend. I knew him better than any other person. And there are things about that statement—well, he never wrote it, that's all. It's too—too flamboyant."

Peter Blake thought with a sudden excitement that this was true. He had not known Johnson well but he had been deeply struck, nevertheless, by the man's complete absence of concentration on self. It was a trait he had noticed in scientific men, and he had admired it particularly in Johnson. The anthropologist had been fundamentally a simple man. But Quayle did not seem to be over-impressed with Judson Holmes' notion; on the other hand, he did not appear to be disappointed. He remained non-committal, and in a flash Peter realized that all this time Quayle had been watching someone else. . . .

"Xosa," said Quayle suddenly. "Give Mr. Hattingh his property."

The little Bantu hurried from his corner, bent over the box on the table, and lifted the lid. He seemed to be unconscious of the eyes fixed on him. With his back turned to the others, he was taking objects out of the box, and placing them on the table. The light winked on a row of silver cups. They were obviously sporting trophies.

"Yours?" said Quayle to Johnny.

Johnny nodded, dazedly. His reddish face had turned a little pale.

"Let me have your gun for a minute, will you, Johnny?" said Quayle conversationally. "I want to check up on something."

As though in a dream, Johnny put his hand to his pocket, but it hovered there, irresolutely while he stared at the policeman.

"I'm waiting," Quayle said gently.

Johnny backed away.

"I'm hanged if I will!" he snarled. "This is a trap! You're trying to frame me. A fine fathead I'd look if I gave you my gun, just like that. And then let you arrest me!" The silence was deadly. "Stop staring at me, you all!"

He was backing away, towards the windows. And now his hand had gone into his pocket, and come out with the gun but he was not holding it out for Quayle to take. It was pointed at Quayle's breast.

"Don't move, anybody, or I'll shoot to kill. I couldn't miss at this range."

He was backing steadily towards the windows. Quayle let him get to within a yard of them, before he spoke.

"Look behind you, Johnny," he said quietly.

Johnny sneered. "A fine fool I'd be if I did!" he replied. "That's an old gag, Quayle. You can't catch me with that."

But they were all looking towards the windows, behind Johnny and what he saw in their eyes dissolved his complacency. He risked a quick glance over

his shoulder, and the hand holding the gun drooped. Van Niekerk stood outside the open window and the gun in his hand was very steady.

Quayle spoke again, in the same even tone. "I wouldn't do it, Johnny. Van Niekerk is a dead shot, and I'll lay a bet that he would get you before you had time to pull the trigger."

And then Johnny laughed. "What the devil!" he said. "You can't prove anything, Quayle! Where's your evidence? Answer me that!"

Quayle crossed the floor and took the gun quietly from Johnny Hattingh's trembling hand. "Why, Johnny," he said mildly, "I think you destroyed the chief evidence yourself, didn't you?"

"Strictly between ourselves," Johnny said. "I did. But you'll have to prove it, old boy!"

Quayle looked down idly at the gun. "I think we'll manage, Johnny," he said quietly. "I think there's still enough evidence left to hang you on."

Johnny's bravado collapsed like a house of cards, and he began to sob. He was still crying like a child when they took him from the room.

* * * * *

On the balcony high above Johannesburg, Quayle spoke at last.

"It began with the theft of the letters," he said. "You remember the letters and the money that were stolen from the Hattingh house? You thought they might be a clue, Peter, and you were right. We know now that they were not Patricia's letters to her husband, written before their marriage; they were her letters to Johnny Hattingh. They were lovers before Simon ever met Patricia. But, of course, Simon never knew that.

"Johnny kept the letters; and it must have been a fearful blow when a petty thief broke into the Hattingh house, and stole the letters, along with certain other things. If the letters were recovered *by Simon*, Johnny and Patricia were sunk. Simon would have divorced Patricia and he'd have kicked Johnny out.

"The letters were stolen from Johnny's room. Mafuti Xosa caught the thief, who couldn't refrain from boasting how he'd climbed to the verandah and entered the house that way. But only Johnny and Eric occupied the upper half of the house; Simon and Patricia occupied the lower half! Therefore the letters were not stolen from Simon.

"I was thrown off the scent by Simon acknowledging the return of the stolen property. But, of course, Johnny and Patricia, when they got the letters from me, never returned them to Simon. They took some money and small valuables from Simon's room beforehand, and 'returned' that to him, as though coming from me. And it worked. I had never mentioned letters to Simon. I told him over the 'phone that it was 'something of his wife's;' and he replied, 'I'll send her round; she can collect it herself.' He played right into their hands!

"The thief Xosa caught returned the letters, and some money; but he was never asked about the *silver cups* which he had also taken, and which were the main part of his booty! Of course, Johnny couldn't mention those without revealing that the thief had been in his room, not Simon's. It was only later, when Xosa, on my instructions, reconnoitred the Hattingh house again, that he discovered the empty cabinet in Johnny's room, and got an inkling of the truth, which further cross-examination of the thief confirmed."

"But look here!" said Peter impatiently. "Granted all that—and it was amazingly good work on your part—you haven't yet explained the murders. On your showing, Johnny and Patricia were safe. They'd given each other up. Simon suspected nothing. I can't see the connection."

Quayle sighed. "They thought they were safe. But Maxwell Johnson found out, and he misconstrued everything. He thought Patricia and Johnny were still lovers. He knew the Hattinghs were a bad lot. He had very little time for Johnny, and not much for Patricia. It was impossible for them to argue with him. And he had another reason for the action he decided to take.

"Simon was mad; we know that now. He'd never forgiven Johnson for that business in Mechwanaland. It was Simon who stole the devil mask, with some weird idea of putting Johnson through some sort of hell. Johnson figured his life wouldn't be safe—unless he could divert the madman's attention elsewhere! He was decent enough to

give Johnny time to clear out but he wrote a letter to Simon telling him about Johnny and Patricia. Remember, Johnson insisted his 'evidence' was 'not of a criminal nature.'

"Unfortunately for himself, he told Johnny what he meant to do. He also told him a few home truths about his mad father, which Johnny later incorporated in that faked message that Johnson was supposed to have written. Johnny, despite all his surface charm, was bad all the way through. He didn't mean to give up his chances of getting the Hattingh fortune. So, confronted with Johnson's ultimatum—which was timed to end on the Tuesday, when Simon would get Johnson's letter—Johnny made up his mind to kill Johnson and get hold of the letter.

"He got Patricia to steal the watches, thus preparing his alibi. Patricia thought he was merely making plans for a last, secret interview with Johnson, to plead with him. Incidentally, she slipped up badly. She didn't bother to take Johnny's watch; you remember he never lost his and was always referring to it? The cowrie shells must have been planted by Simon, following up his idea of scaring Johnson as part of his elaborate revenge.

"Johnny changed the clock, and, with Patricia primed to guarantee it was correct 'by the wireless,' had sufficient time to run over to Johnson's cottage, pretend to be returning the devil mask —which he'd taken from Simon without Simon's knowledge—kill Johnson with the spear, wrap the body in the straw cloak, hastily search the house for any other evidence Johnson might have concealed, and carry the body to the Evil House, by which he hoped to delay discovery of the murder.

"Then he went straight back to town —and met Patricia. We'll never know what was said betwen them. But at any rate he saw he couldn't trust her. He was panic-stricken, and strangled her in his car. He put her body in the rumble seat, drove on to Levinson's, the tobacconist, to establish his alibi. Then he returned home and met you two."

ANN gasped. "You don't mean that, when we drove out with him in his car later, Patricia's body was—"

"It was still in the rumble seat," said Quayle grimly. "Well, you know what happened at the cottage. But finding Johnson still alive must have given him a shock. He had to go on desperately improvising, and presently he saw with relief that the apparent 'black magic' of an 'invisible murderer' escaping from the Evil House made his position all the safer.

"He realized that if he now smashed the false time schedule, it wouldn't interfere with his own alibi—for he had undoubtedly spoken to Levinson—and it would put the police in his favor. He pretended to 'help' us by revealing part, but only a part, of the machinery of his own crime!

"But he said too much. He set his brother's mind working, and Eric, without in the least suspecting the *identity* of the murderer, grasped the *motive*—the mysterious evidence against some person at which Johnson had hinted. Moreover, he grasped the significance of the time-limit being Tuesday, and went to the post office to collect it himself.

"Johnny was on the same trail, and they met. Johnny saw he was trapped. Whatever happened, Eric would insist on seeing the letter. And he would realize that Johnny was a double murderer! There was, by Johnny's lights, only one thing to do. He'd taken the poisoned darts because they might come in useful, if he were cornered. Now he used them. He had to act quickly, and there he was, with Eric's body at his feet. Then he saw Ann coming, and got the idea of faking more 'black magic.' He had just time to repeat the walking corpse act, and dodge out the back of the building, before he joined us in the police station.

"When he went with us to the post office, after Ann screamed, he blandly led us to the sorting office, and removed the letter he wanted right under our noses! It was he who went through the Hattingh mail, remember, and he knew Johnson's handwriting.

"He'd got the letter, but to do so he'd committed three murders. And I made it clear to him that the police weren't being taken in by the 'black magic' stuff and that we'd never rest until the murderer was caught.

"And then Johnny had an interview with his father, and it became clear to him that Johnson had been right and that his father was mad. Johnny saw

that if he could direct suspicion to his father, Simon would be no worse off; his fate was bound to be a padded cell in any case. And the case would be closed, for a lunatic couldn't defend himself or convince the police he was innocent!

"Johnny got his father to the cottage. I don't think he envisaged the end; but he faked that message from Johnson, and then led us to the cottage and told us a yarn which pointed straight at Simon as the murderer. When we burst in, Simon went berserk. He was out to kill, and—well, you know what happened.

"Up until then, I believed Simon was the murderer. But bits of Johnny's story worried me. For example, Johnny said Maxwell Johnson locked himself in the Evil House when he heard his murderer shouting. But Simon wasn't the only one who shouted. Somebody else had shouted, too. I was trying to remember who it was—and then, after Simon's death, we read Johnson's 'message.' As Judson Holmes said, it didn't read like Johnson. But, more important, it didn't fit in with what Johnson himself had told us. I puzzled over the discrepancy. And then suddenly I knew the 'message' was — must be — a fake."

"How?" demanded Peter.

"The police had been in possession of the cottage for over twelve hours! Knowing the murderer had searched for something, do you think we hadn't searched, too? We turned the place upside down. The guards were only withdrawn afterwards, *at Johnny's suggestion.* And then I remembered who the other person was who had shouted outside the Evil House—Johnny!

"Xosa supplied the finishing touch, by bringing the silver cups, which he'd got back from the native thief. Everything fell into place, then."

Quayle shook his shoulders, as if to throw off a weight. He rose, and extended a hand.

"And now, if you'll pardon me, I must go. You know the whole truth; and the ghosts are laid. The Straw Men murder case is closed."

A CASE FOR McCOY

By DONALD BAYNE HOBART

A private eye enters a mad murder mixup!

I saw the handle of the knife

McCOY is the name, Jerry McCoy. I had some experience in the ring in the middleweight class, but now I'm a private detective. In fact from the number of clients who don't beat a path to my door, I sometimes suspect it is not only private but secret and confidential.

Which was why that when Emmitt Greer walked into my office I welcomed him with open arms and a hopeful leer. I had never seen the man before but I had a feeling he could be a cash customer.

"Mr. McCoy," he said. "I am Emmitt Greer, of Blodgett, Blaston, Wakefield and Greer." He bowed, apparently to the gentlemen mentioned. "Attorneys."

"The rent and the phone bill are paid," I said. "Which is it—the electric company or the finance company?"

Greer looked shocked. There was something about him that reminded me of a prosperous middle-aged mouse with a mustache instead of whiskers. He seated himself in a chair across from my desk. It was a fairly warm day in early spring, but he was wearing gloves and an overcoat. He took off the gloves and arranged them neatly on top of the derby he balanced on his knee.

"This is a personal matter," he said. "I would like to engage your services as a private investigator. You were highly recommended to me."

"By whom?" I asked with unbecoming eagerness.

"I had a hunch," said Greer. "I saw your name on the door as I was walking along the corridor, and decided you were just the man who might be able to do something about poor Arabelle.

"People who inspire my hunches are always highly recommended to me."

"Have you a belfry?" I asked.

"You mean so we could keep the bats in it?" said Emmitt Greer calmly. "No, we haven't, but we do live in an old house in Rye that I call the haunted mansion. In merry jest, of course."

"Who do you mean by we?"

"Why, Miss Arabelle Holden; she is my aunt, and I often worry about it. Then there is Doctor Deerwater, and the supernumerary."

"Such as?" I asked. I wasn't going to let him catch me on that last one.

"The servants, Deerwater's office nurse." Greer took out a wallet. "As I said before, Mr. McCoy, I would like to engage your services, and I'll pay you ten dollars a day for the job."

"Twenty dollars a day," I said.

"Fifteen." Greer placed a five and a ten-dollar bill on the desk. The mouse obviously had a mind of his own. "And

a bonus of five hundred dollars if you prevent me from being murdered by precisely nine-twenty-six A.M. tomorrow."

"Wait a minute," I said. "This murder angle make the fees more sliding. Who is going to murder you and why?"

EMMITT GREER stood up. He put on his derby. "My dear man," he said. "If I knew the answers to those questions I wouldn't bother to hire a detective." He picked up a pencil and started writing on a desk pad I had there. "This is the address," he went on. "I'll expect you out on the two-twenty-five." He handed me the pad. "Frankly I think we need that belfry, Mr. McCoy." And with that he left.

A job was a job so I took the Stamford local out to Rye that afternoon. Showing his faith in human nature or hunches—I never knew which—Greer met the train. I found it a relief to find out he was still alive. He was driving a flashy roadster, and the derby, overcoat and gloves had been replaced by sport clothes.

"Hello, Jerry," he said, rushing up to me on the platform and shaking my hand. "So glad you could come out for a little visit."

"I'm too, too happy about the whole thing," I said as he led me to the roadster by the arm. "What's the gimmick?"

"You're an old friend of mine," Greer said. "Naturally I didn't tell them at the house that I was having a detective come out here. That would give the whole thing away."

He climbed in behind the wheel. As I started to sit next to him, I noticed a piece of paper sticking up between the back of the seat and the cushion. I drew it out, and automatically read the words typewritten on the paper. It read:

You'll die sooner—now that you hired a detective.

I handed the paper to Greer. He read it and then frowned.

"This was written on the portable typewriter I keep in my room," he said. "I can tell by the way the letter 'e' is crooked."

I reached out and pulled the key out of the ignition lock just as he was about to start the roadster.

"We're not going anywhere until you tell me what this is all about," I said firmly. "Why does somebody want to murder you?"

"I don't know," Greer said. "I told you that before. A week ago I got a typewritten note just like this one. It said, 'You have seven days to live.' At first I thought it was some sort of crude joke, and didn't pay much attention to it. The seven days were up yesterday, and when I found ground glass in my breakfast yesterday I became alarmed."

"Ground glass, eh," I said. "You suspect anyone?"

"Yes, Doctor Deerwater and Arabelle," said Greer. "Though I can't see the motive, when Arabelle is the rich member of the family. She owns the house, and has quite a bit of money in the bank. But if you ask me, that woman is crazy."

"All right, I'll ask you," I said. "Why is she crazy?"

"She's in love with Doctor Deerwater," said Greer. "And they are both in their fifties. Ridiculous!"

I handed him the ignition key and he started the motor. As we drove away from the station I was thinking busily. At first I had thought this case would be a bore, but now it looked like it might be interesting.

In about fifteen minutes we reached the house. It was a big place near the Sound. The rambling white house had been built at least thirty years ago. As we got out of the car and came up on the porch that ran along the front of the house, I saw a sign hanging in a window to the right of the front door. It read, J. M. DEERWATER, M.D.

"Arabelle rents part of the lower floor to the doctor for his office," Greer said as he caught my glance at the sign. "That woman is always thinking of ways to make money."

We went into the house. I gave my bag to a butler and then Greer took me into the living room to meet the rest of the household. Arabelle Holden proved to be a bright-faced, dark-haired woman, smartly dressed and gracious. If she was fifty, she didn't look it. Doctor Deerwater was rather thin, with brown hair and mustache, and a brisk professional air. I liked him.

I also met a blonde woman who appeared in her late forties and who kept giving Greer looks that apparently meant a great deal. She was Nan Regan,

the doctor's office nurse.

"I'm so glad that Emmitt invited a friend out here," Arabelle said. "Since he lost his position—I mean since he retired—he has a hard time finding something to do."

GREER looked at the nurse, and I got the idea that she was more than willing to take care of his spare time.

Doctor Deerwater glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's nearly three-thirty," he said. "If you'll pardon me, I'll go to my room and freshen up a bit before my afternoon office-hours." He smiled at me. "Nice to have you with us, McCoy."

He left the room. Miss Arabelle looked at the nurse. "Don't you have to get the office ready for the doctor, Miss Regan?" she said.

"Oh, yes," said Miss Regan, and she gave Miss Arabelle what could only be called a dirty look. "That's right."

"I must put the roadster away," said Greer following the nurse out of the room. "Be back in a few minutes."

"You're a detective, of course, Mr. McCoy," said Miss Arabelle when I was alone with her. "There's no use denying it. Emmitt has no friends in town that he could or would bring out here for a visit. Especially someone whose name he has never mentioned before."

"He hired me to keep him from being murdered," I said.

"Murdered!" exclaimed Arabelle, and then she smiled. "Who would want to kill him, except on general principles? He tried to take his father's place as a member of that law firm and failed; he is always broke. Any woman can make a fool of him, just as Doctor Deerwater's nurse is doing now."

"May I ask you a personal question?" I demanded as I realized that Arabelle was about the most attractive woman I had ever met, and then as she nodded. "How old are you?"

"Thirty-eight," she said and her smile was lovely. "You see I'm ten years younger than Emmitt, even though I am his aunt. His father—my brother he was—and I were born nearly twenty years apart."

"I'm forty and a bachelor," I said, as though that was suddenly important. "Greer told me that you and Doctor Deerwater—"

"Are good friends," she said, her brown eyes fixed on my face. "That's all."

I must have been a little dazed by her nearness, for I mumbled something about unpacking my bag and hurried out of the room. I spotted my hat lying on a table in the hall and put it on as I went upstairs.

I had forgotten to ask anyone where my room was located, so I went along the second floor hall looking for a guest room that had my bag in it. I peered in through an open door and then halted and stood staring.

A figure was sprawled face down on the floor and I could see the handle of a knife sticking out of the man's back.

I went closer and saw it was Doctor Deerwater. He was in his trousers and shirtsleeves and apparently had been about to change his clothes when he had been stabbed in the back and killed.

"This doesn't make sense," I thought. "After it all has been planned so carefully, killing the doctor now messes up the whole thing."

Acting on a hunch I went to the door. There was a key in the lock and I took it out, and then closed and locked the door of the room from the outside. I wanted to be sure the police would find the corpse just as it was, when I sent for them later.

I hurried downstairs. Arabelle was still in the living room, and I wondered if she had remained there hoping that I might come back. There was no way of telling without asking her directly, and I wouldn't do that. But it was a nice thought anyway.

"Doctor Deerwater has been murdered," I told her. "I just found his body upstairs. He was stabbed in the back."

It was a shock to her and she turned pale, but she didn't scream or faint, and she recovered quickly.

Jerry McCoy, I told myself, here is a woman!

"You know this house," I said. "Is there any way of overhearing a conversation in the doctor's office without being seen?"

"There's a closet in the old front parlor," she said. "The rear wall of this is very thin—just plaster board. I had it walled off to make the doctor's reception room. Come on."

WE went into the old parlor and into the closet. By putting my ear against the wall I could hear voices coming from the other side of the panel.

"You fool!" came Greer's voice. "Why did you do it—why did you kill Deerwater?"

"Because I thought it was what you wanted," said Nan Regan tearfully. "You have been talking and talking about the money you would inherit from your aunt's will after she was dead, and you were afraid that she might marry the doctor and change that will."

"I planned to get rid of them all right," said Greer. "But I wasn't going to be so crude about it. I hired the detective—"

"What detective?" interrupted Nan Regan.

"Why, McCoy, the man I brought here today."

I saw that Arabelle had her ear pressed to the wall listening just as I was doing.

"You brought the detective here?" said Nan. "Why do that?"

"Because I wanted him to be convinced that Arabelle and the doctor planned to murder me," Greer said. "And now you've spoiled everything. You little fool! I could kill you!"

For a moment there was silence and then I heard a sound like a key rasping in a lock. "Why—why are you locking that door?" Nan demanded in a frightened voice. "Why are you looking at me like that, Emmitt? Oh, no, no!"

I'm pretty husky and I motioned Arabelle to move back. When I hit that panel with my shoulder something gave. The section of beaver board loosened, and crashed to the floor.

Greer had been strangling Nan, choking her to death, and he did not release his grip on her throat even at the noise. I slammed a fist against the side of his head and that broke his grip on the nurse. As he staggered back, I hit him again. His knees gave way beneath him and he dropped to the floor.

"You got him, Jerry," Arabelle said, and the way she voiced my name made it sound like something she had just discovered and liked a lot. "But I still don't understand how he planned to get rid of me."

"After I had been around and heard how you put ground glass in his oatmeal and other crazy things, it was obvious he planned to make it look like you did," I said. "Such as supposedly writing him threatening notes that he actually wrote on his own typewriter; I was supposed to think you were quite balmy. Then he was going to kill the doctor and make it look like you did it in a fit of insanity."

"But I'm not crazy," said Arabelle looking at me wistfully. "Am I, Jerry?"

"No," I said. "No, Arabelle, merely glamorous, glorious and wonderful."

We didn't notice Nan Regan as she slipped quietly into the doctor's private office. The closed door muffled the sound of the shot. Perhaps it is better that way, I thought, poor little fool.

Arabelle was beside me as I phoned for the police. She still is—and when I say the Mrs. is the McCoy—she sure is just that!

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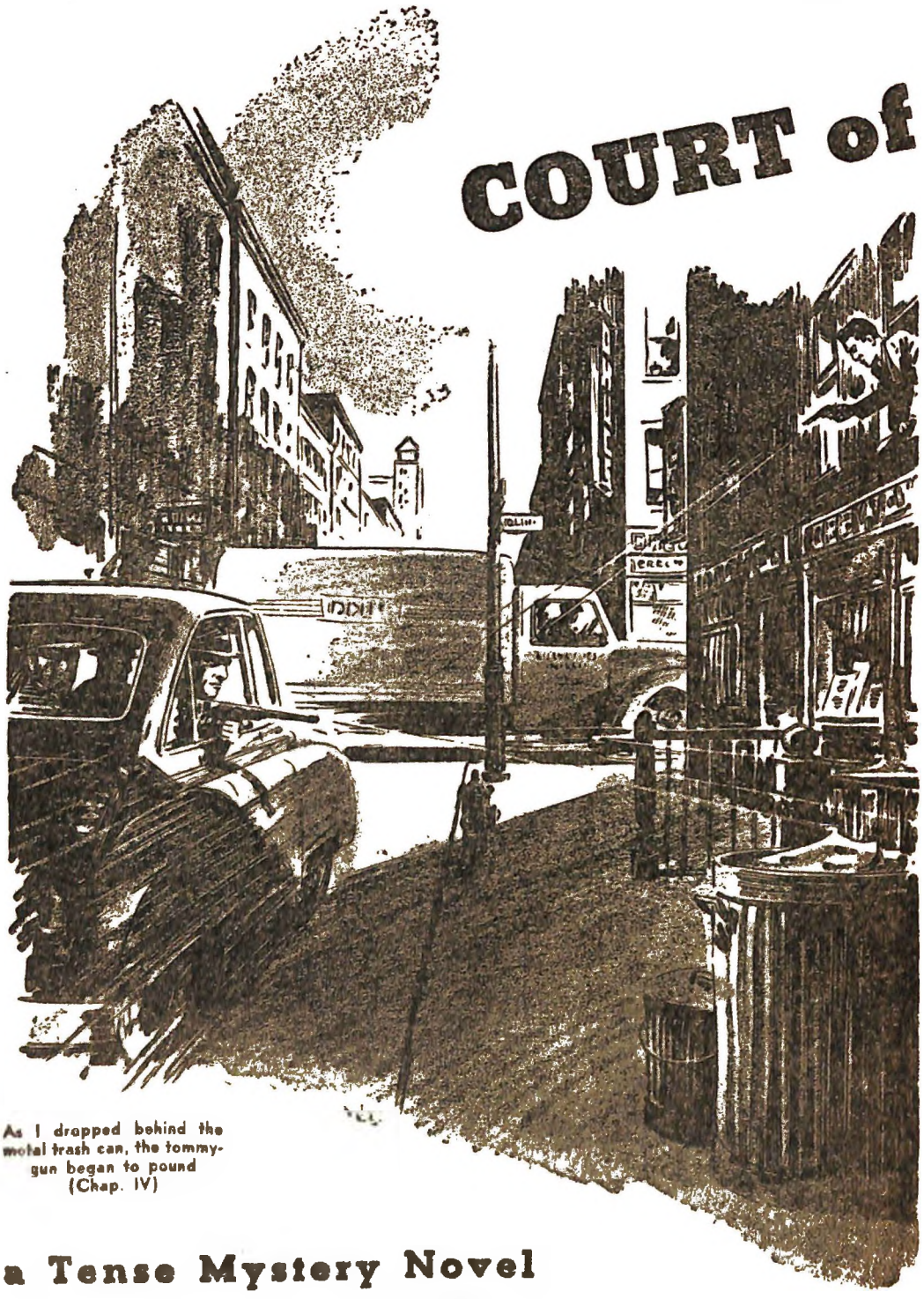


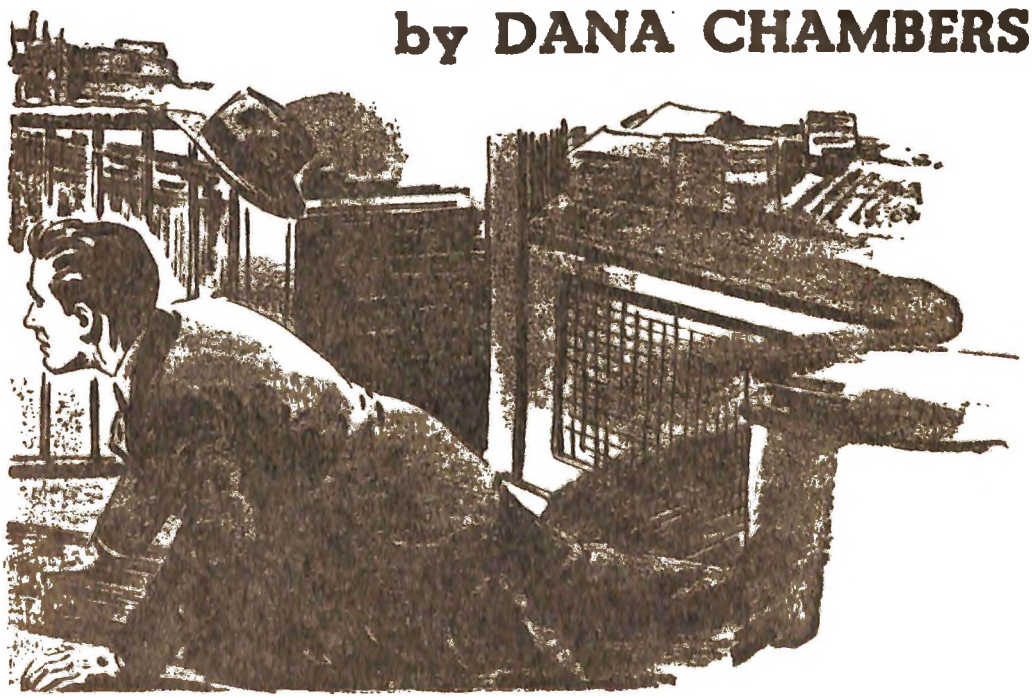
As I dropped behind the metal trash can, the tommy-gun began to pound (Chap. IV)

a Tense Mystery Novel

SHADOWS

A strange shot in the night, the death of a writer and an odd suicide message are the keys to a catastrophic threat!

by DANA CHAMBERS



I

THE right front tire blew suddenly and I fought the wheel all across the road and we hit the center curbing with a great bouncing smash. Joan said calmly:

"Nice going, Boyd. You going to try to fix it? We must be nearly there."

"We *are* there." I pointed. "Cross Court's right behind those big elms. We'll just bump on over to it: the tire's shot anyway."

I started the stalled motor, wrenched the Ford around, and turned off the Shore Road into a maple-lined side street. Something snarled angrily through the sky above our heads, going away fast.

"Like big hornets, aren't they?" Joan said. We rolled up to a curb and stopped. As the motor died, the noises in the sky multiplied in our ears. Circling planes were tracing complex arcs of flight.

"They do sound like hornets," I said. "One quick kiss? We're there."

Cross Court was an enormous building. It filled a whole block, and the blocks in Bay Ridge are big blocks. It

had gardens, a fountain, a swimming pool, bowling alleys, a gymnasium, restaurants, physicians, dentists, tailors, automatic elevators.

After locking the car, we went down broad low stone steps and through an iron gateway. The flagged walk which circled the fountain narrowed sharply just before the main doorway was reached, and a wooden arm swinging from the side of a little porter's lodge barred our way. But while we were still three steps away from the arm, a thin light flashed from somewhere and the arm swung back. "*That's* ingenious," Joan said, passing through ahead of me. "Same like in Penn Station."

"Effete," I said. "I don't know what is going to happen to Western civilization."

Instantly I wished I hadn't said it. Because at that moment, in the spring of Nineteen-Forty-Two, what was going to happen to Western civilization seemed very doubtful indeed.

We faced a brilliantly uniformed doorman in a dim be-palmed foyer. "Mr. Kerr," I said. "He's expecting us."

"Thank you, sir." Metallic stridencies issued from a wall loudspeaker; then the doorman came back and said: "This way, sir," and I ushered Joan into a red-and-gold lacquered cage and pressed the button marked "6." Double doors slammed shut and we rose slowly upward to the sixth floor and got out.

Bill Kerr, standing grinning in the hall outside his apartment, looked very dashing.

"You didn't mention black tie, you heel," I said, prodding the pearl in his shirt front, "so we have on only our simple working clothes. This is Bill, Joan: William, mitt my affianced bride."

"Don't be absurd—brides should be kissed," Bill said, and did so. "Come in, come in," he went on expansively. "The Dutchman is muddling with martinis and they will probably be terrible."

HE threw a door wide and waited for us to pass in. Through a partly opened inner door came the closing chords of Debussy's *L'Isle*, played softly. Joan slipped out of her jacket, which Bill hung carefully in a clothes closet. I slung my worn polo coat across the nearest chair. Bill said:

"You know Helen Watkins? And Philip Merkley? Ona asked them up for a cocktail and they're threatening to stay for dinner." He threw the inner door open and we followed Joan in.

Ona at the piano stood up and smiled. Half Dutch, half German, she had been one of the leading actresses of the Berlin stage; but with Hitler's rise she had left Germany in disgust in 1935 and came to America in 1939. In the four years between, she had married a refugee Austrian artist, and taken up photography with the same passion which had distinguished her in the theater. At this she had become very good. Her husband was in Florida now and a divorce was imminent. Bill was mad about her.

"Hel-*lo*, Nile," she said, and I presented Joan. "This is Helen Watkins," said Ona, turning toward the divan, "and this—Philip Merk-lee."

I had heard of both of them, of course: Merkley the playwright and Helen Watkins the book reviewer. They were supposed to be living together somewhere in the wilds of Brooklyn. I can't say I felt drawn to either of them. Merkley was obviously playing Noel Coward with a dash of Michael Arlen; the blond bombshell of the booksy folk was busy acting—God knew who. Sally Rand, maybe.

Ona said hospitably, "You two had better stay for a bite with us, Helen. There is Belgian hare, very good. I cook him myself."

"I wish we could," Helen Watkins' languid voice regretted, "but Phil has some ghastly meeting in town tonight, and I haven't done my Sunday stuff yet." She added to me, in a fulsome tone: "I've been wondering when we'd catch up with each other, Mr. Boyd. I've wanted for a long time to tell you how swell I think your stuff is. Especially the last month or so: the series on national complacency." She gave me a warm, soft hand and let her fingers curl slightly against my wrist. "We really must dash, Phil."

"Yoicks — instantly!" Merkley gave me a cordial smile. He had shiny teeth and a thin straight line of dark mus-

tache. He wasn't just playing Noel Coward, I realized: he was playing Noel Coward playing d'Artagnan. And doing a good job. He turned to Ona.

"Tomorrow," he informed her, "is Saturday. What about a cocktail with us around lunch-time? And stay for

NILE BOYD

lunch." His dark eyes came back to me. "Love to have you two join us," he hazarded.

I glanced at Joan but Bill's voice cut in. "Don't think I can make it, Phil," he said. "Not that that needs to stop Ona."

"Oh, Bill-ee!" Ona chided him. "You said—"

Bill-ee was lighting a cigarette as she spoke. I remember the exact sequence: the match being scratched as she said his name, the tiny yellow flame flaring as she began her reproach.

Then, as if the flame had been a signal, came a splintering crash of glass, deafening in the quiet room.

We all stared. The jagged hole in the middle window just behind Bill was eloquent. Star-shaped, with long cracks radiating out from it like spider's legs. I glanced up at the ceiling. The bullet had buried itself there.

"Down! Drop down, all of you!" a voice said sharply. The voice was my own.

Joan and Helen Watkins subsided gracefully on the divan; Ona was standing one second and flat on the floor the next. Bill and Philip Merkley both let their legs go limp and sat down promptly on the carpet and I let myself down heavily beside Joan and squeezed her hand.

"You have much of that around here, Bill?" I said.

"Much of what?"

"Brats with air-guns."

"What makes you think it was an air-gun?"

I pointed to a slanting scratch in the ceiling, punctuated at its inner end by a small round hole. "Too big a hole for BB shot and we didn't hear a sound. High-power air-gun, for my money. Someone standing in the street, perhaps. Kitchen's got a window looking that way, hasn't it?"

"Yes."

I went fast into the kitchen, switched off the light, and peered out of the window. Now it was quite dark. Two street-lamps showed an empty sidewalk across the road. I could just distinguish the outlines of Joan's parked Ford. A faint sound behind me was Bill. He said in my ear: "See anything?"

"No."

"Ona's going to have a fit. She's been scared stiff all day—I'll tell you later. What do we do now?"

I STOOD up. "We become very big and brave," I whispered. "Because from that roadway you couldn't hit anything but the ceiling anyhow. Also one of us had better go down and whale the tar out of any little hellion we find lurking in the bushes. Preferably me, because I don't live here." I switched the light on again.

We were, I think, quite convincing about it to the girls: the brat angle, I mean. Bill and I argued over who should go down and finally Bill took the elevator with the departing Watkins-Merkley ménage. As the door closed behind the three departures Joan said:

"Ona—you don't mind if I call you Ona? Nile always calls you that—you must let me help you with that hare.

And if no one minds, you might pour me a Martini, Nile. And pour Ona one too."

It was beautifully done: the dismissal of the bullet episode as though it had never happened, the further moment or two of grace given Ona to pull herself together. And she needed it. For if ever I saw terror writ in large capital letters on a human face, it was inscribed on the Dutch girl's.

We sipped Martinis in silence until Bill came back. He had an evening paper under his arm. "No one around," he announced. "I met the superintendent and he'll have the pane fixed tomorrow. Might be that Jergens kid, Ona." He bent and put his arms around her. "And how are you, Miss Hagen?" he asked, "You look a little pale. Perhaps I had better make us all just a touch, just a suspicion of—"

Ona shook her head decisively. "No. You will have no appetite left for my hare. Joan, if you *will* help me."

"Of course."

The girls went into the kitchen. There was a long pause. Then Bill said suddenly, low and fast, "There's no use my starting to tell you now. Ona will be back here any moment. But man, am I glad you're here tonight!"

"You must come up and see us sometime, too."

"I'm serious, Nile. The strangest thing—I don't know whether to believe it myself yet or not. But I *may* have got a line for you that you want."

"What?"

"Could be," he said. "Know anything about photography?"

Ona at the kitchen door said with adequate gaiety: "I think he is done now. Bill-ee, is the sharpener on the table?" Joan's face behind her was grave but when she saw my eyes on her, she smiled.

We sat down to dinner. By tacit consent no one referred to the evening paper, which was lying on the divan with a large black headline too clearly visible. The headline said: ANZAC CORPS ANNIHILATED. I asked Ona how the Florida divorce situation was shaping up. She said that Paul would get his divorce in two more weeks.

I said: "Now, you see? The last time I saw you, you were weeping because you said it would never come through. *Now* will you believe me when I tell you that everything comes out in the wash?"

"The Dutchman is feeling better by the minute," Bill said. He turned to me. "She had a nightmare in the middle of the night last night after a scare she had yesterday. A large, tough man came by, apparently an investigator from some Federal bureau. He seems to have been very nasty indeed."

"What for?" Joan asked.

"You see, Joan, the Dutchman is, technically speaking, an enemy alien. Her father is German. So she has to mind her step."

"My camera!" Ona broke in, wrathful. "He says I must give up my camera! And you, *you*—"

She did not finish. The radio in the corner beside Bill's typewriter stand had begun to mutter to itself. News coming on. Bill had stretched out a long arm and turned the dial to give it more volume. "—Bluebirds over the white cliffs of Dover," a rich contralto promised, "Tomorrow. Just you wait and see!"

Ona looked puzzled. "Now why do they change the words?" she asked plaintively. "That is a stupid ending. The right words are 'Tomorrow—when the world is free'."

Joan said: "Fascist influence of the national broadcasting companies, doubtless," and everyone laughed.

It was quiet now overhead. The planes had gone. The wind blowing cool and fresh through the shattered pane bore to us suddenly three long sad blasts, then a fourth. It was like steel fingers tightening on my spine. Couldn't I have an hour, ten minutes even, without having to think about ships? Bill refilled my glass.

Even the Lower Bay was jammed with ships these last weeks: tankers, freighters, converted liners. You could see a cluster of them one evening, and next morning at daybreak they would all be gone. Another convoy headed out from Ambrose. And out in the cold green waters between Montauk and the Banks, something which we could not explain was lurking. Something which learned, with terrifying accuracy, the departure hour and the route of vessel after vessel.

A new type of submarine? With new

super-sensitive instruments? No one knew. The mournful siren died. Suddenly behind me I heard a curious soft whisper: the kind of dry rustle that a snake might make as it slithered over the floor.

II

I HAPPENED to be sitting in the chair nearest the door when a little folded white scrap of paper slid in to us. I made the door in two jumps and wrenched at the knob.

But the safety catch was on and my fingers had to fumble with that for a moment. By the time I had turned it and swung the door inward, seconds had passed. I stood in the open doorway glaring up and down the hall and it was quite, quite empty.

I went to the elevator. A light burning behind a small round glass showed a tiny needle indicator moving gradually from right to left. Someone was in the elevator and the elevator was descending, and I was six floors up.

I went back to the apartment. I picked up the folded white paper and gave it to Bill, who looked at it and handed it back to me, open. It held just four words in a crude penciled scrawl:

Mr. Tennant is waiting.

"Is that right?" I said, putting the paper down where Ona and Joan could both see it. "Are we going to let Mr. Tennant continue to wait? And why doesn't your doorman or your switchboard-operator use the telephone?"

"Our telephone is broken, for some reason," Bill informed me. "And there's a house rule against bellowing messages up through the loudspeaker from the front hall—except to announce guests."

"And Mr. Tennant? Where's he waiting?"

"He is waiting," Bill said, "in Papa Joe's *bistro*. He goes in there sometimes of an evening and drinks up all his money. Then he telephones us and we come up and buy him another drink. Very amusing fellow, Hank Tennant."

Ona sighed. "Oh, I sup-pose we had better go," she said. "I do not much care for this Tennant, but Bill-ee thinks he is won-derful."

Five minutes later I opened the outer door and Bill switched out the apart-

The loathsome man had climbed over the last parapet —and that was the moment that I shot him (Chap. VIII)

ment lights. The main boulevard where Papa Joe's was situated, was only a block away, though, as I have mentioned, the blocks thereabouts are long blocks. "We'll take the side entrance," Bill murmured, and we rounded a corner to a door labeled FAMILY ENTRANCE and came directly into Papa Joe's back room.

It was quite a small room, with a tessellated floor and half a dozen round tables. It had a telephone booth in one corner, and a second door leading directly into the main restaurant bar, whence came brassy strains from a mammoth jukebox. A huge gray Shepherd lay quietly in front of the telephone booth.

Bill said: "There's Hank's dog, so Hank can't be far away. Where shall we sit, darling?"

"Anywhere. Here," Ona said, and led the way to one of the little tables.

A dark-faced Italian with a napkin on his arm appeared. Bill looked round the table inquiringly. "Little Scotch?"

Three nods were practically simultaneous with a sonorous "Hi, children," from the door.

"And the same for Mr. Tennant."

The man who joined us was somewhere between thirty-five and forty-five. He had a narrow, humorous, bitter face, and looked ruthless. The eyes were a pale gray and very cold.

Bill said: "Hank here will never tell you, so I will. He is the St. Christopher of the Burma Road. Just back from China, where he had been dropping bombs on Japs like mad, till they shot his crate from under him."

Tennant grinned. "You talk too much," he said, and turned to me. "I've seen you somewhere," he began. "Of course. Your picture at the top of your column." He put out a hand. "Glad to meet you," he said. "I've only been back about a month, but I think I've read every line you've written since then."

"If I can find a rhumba, Joan," Bill said, "will you dance with me?"

A minute later the jukebox was making stentorian statements about the Argentine, and Joan was drifting in Bill's arms. I said politely, "Ona, would you care to dance?" and when she shook her head, I said to Tennant:

"How were things when you left China?"

"Confused," he said, with a twisted grin. "After Rangoon—well, you fly yourself?"

"Wish I could. Did a little observation work in 'thirty-seven, around Madrid."

"Really? I was around those parts then. Eddie Turner's outfit."

I looked at him with increased respect; that had been one of the best. Then, as the music died, Joan and Bill came back to the table.

"How about giving *me* a dance, Miss Adams?" I said to Joan.

"If you happen to have a nickel—with pleasure," she replied.

The jukebox was just inside the bar proper. I punched button number eighteen, which was "Begin the Beguine," and a moment later took Joan in my arms.

HALF a minute later Ona screamed. Joan and I stopped in our tracks. Above the song's last crescendo, the great dog was snarling. Voices from the bar were startled, clamorous, behind us.

The Dutch girl was sitting exactly where she'd been, and Hank Tennant had one hand clamped firmly over her mouth. Her eyes were dilated so wide I could see the whites all round the iris.

"Something frighten Ona?" I said gently. "Or is she ill?"

Tennant took his hand away, gave me a somber half-smile. "She—pointed at the window just now," he said. "Then she screamed." He turned to Ona. "What was it, darling? What did you see?"

Joan and I, now standing beside the table, waited. The Dutch girl shuddered, put both hands suddenly against her eyeballs, and pressed hard. Then she took her fingers away quickly and sat up.

"That was stupid," she said, her voice surprisingly clear and firm. "I saw a face at the window there. A terrible face. Then it—went away." She settled back in the chair. "Nile, take a look outside, will you?"

The long bare side street was all but empty, and the three pedestrians visible were approaching rather than fleeing. "*Spurlos versenkt,*" I said to Ona, when I went back inside, and was conscious of a faint jerk of Hank Tennant's head

toward me. "Where's young Bill?" I added.

"Must be in the men's room," Tennant said.

The stuffy little washroom was empty. I came out, back into the crowded, noisy bar. The dark-faced waiter scurrying past stopped at my hand on his elbow. "Where did Mr. Kerr go?" I demanded.

"Meester Kair?"

"Yes. He must have gone out through the bar here. You see him?"

He shook his head. "Wait. I find out." He darted to the end of the bar, beckoned to a fat gray-haired man in shirtsleeves, and said something to him. The waiter returned. "I ask Papa Joe," he said. "But he has not seen Mr. Kerr go out. But perhaps he goes out all the same. Perhaps he goes to buy evening paper."

He smiled reassuringly, darted away. I had a sudden thought. On the way to Papa Joe's I had told Bill about our blow-out. Perhaps he had gone to the garage I had seen next door, to arrange about the tire. I might just glance in at the garage.

I did. A tall, thin Negro in a rubber apron was sloshing down a gray Cadillac with a hose. He shook his head when I spoke and jerked a thumb toward the office. A nasty-looking piece of goods sat inside the office; he had the little red pig eyes and the jaw of a gorilla. "You know Mr. Kerr, from Cross Court?" I said abruptly.

"Naw."

"You fix tires?"

"Yeah."

"My car's down outside Cross Court. Ford sedan. The front tire blew. Can you shoot someone down there to put the spare on for me?"

He considered this. "Sure," he said at last. "Cost you two dollars. In advance."

"Get it fixed in ten minutes and I'll meet your man there," I directed, and threw a couple of singles on the desk. I would reserve the pleasure of telling him how I liked his manners until the tire was fixed, I thought. "This friend of mine, Bill Kerr," I said chattily. "He told me to see you about the tire. I thought he might have come in here himself. Tall fellow?"

"Naw. I ain't seen him."

I gave him the tire-lock key, and went back to Papa Joe's as fast as I could. Ona and Joan were sitting nervously at the table with their coats on, poised evidently, for flight.

"Where's Tennant?" I asked.

"*He's* gone to look for Bill now," Joan said. "And poor Ona is frantic."

"No!" said Ona firmly. "Bill-ee is all right. He may be at home now. I think we had better go and see." She stood up. I paid the check and the three of us walked back toward the bay.

Again the laughter of the fountain, again the flash from the selenium cell, again the back-swinging arm. Inside the little porter's lodge a uniformed sentry stood smartly at attention.

"Hello, John," Ona said. "Did you see Mr. Kerr come in just now?"

He shook his head. "No, Mrs. Kerr. But I only came on a couple of minutes ago. The other fellow had a toothache."

"All right, John. Thanks." Ona sped on ahead of us into the foyer. A door beyond the elevator bank opened and a white-haired attendant stepped through. "Did you see Mr. Kerr, Rudolph?" Ona asked.

"Not since you all went out, Mrs. Kerr." He touched his cap respectfully.

I THINK Ona would have fallen except for my arm suddenly curved around her. We stepped into the elevator, Joan at Ona's other side. The doors slammed and we slid upward. I said, "You suppose he might have dropped off to see Merkley? Don't they live in this building?"

Ona clapped her hands. "But of course, Nile! We can go there."

"We can go home first," I said firmly. "And I'll see Merkley right away." The cage stopped, the doors slammed back, and I was very surprised. For Hank Tennant was pacing toward us down the hall.

"*You* have any luck?" he asked.

Ona's face was ghastly. "You did not bring him home?"

"Couldn't find him." Tennant turned to me. "He's pretty tight, whether you caught it or not. I thought he might have rolled on home, but the door's locked and I can't get any answer."

"You live here in Cross Court too, Tennant?" I asked.

"Yes. Other end of the building."

I said: "We were just debating whether he might have dropped off at Merkley's place."

Tennant looked doubtful. "I think he's just up the line somewhere, tilting a couple more quick ones. He's a hard man to handle when he gets started."

"I know," I agreed. "Tell you, Ona: I'll just drop down and make sure that the tire's on straight, and then we can make the rounds in the car. Of course, he might have come in while they were changing the guard at the porter's lodge. Hadn't we better look and see?"

The Dutch girl fumbled for her key. "Let me, Ona," said Tennant and slid the little flat Yale key into the lock.

The door swung back. Bill was inside, all right. He lay sprawled in the middle of the Persian carpet, with a scorched hole in the side of his head, and a black .45 automatic in his limp right hand.

With one hand clamped over Ona's mouth I shut off her scream, and propelled her into the foyer. Tennant's hand at Joan's elbow was already urging her inside too. I hooked a foot around the door and it slammed shut with a bang.

"Hold it here, Tennant," I said, and he nodded. "Perhaps someone is still lurking here!"

But there was no one in the bathroom or bedroom. Tennant in the foyer said quietly: "No one in here, Boyd, either."

I said to Joan: "You and Ona go in the bedroom. Tennant and I can handle this."

Ona choked. "A doctor—quick, Nile," and I took her gently by the arm, "He doesn't need a doctor, Ona. Joan, please?" The Dutch girl moved as though walking in her sleep, but she moved. The bedroom door closed behind the two.

I knelt on one side of my friend. Bill's forehead and hand were almost as warm as in life. "He left—he left while I was dancing with Joan," I said, raising my head to stare at Tennant's burning eyes. "Say half an hour ago—close to twelve-thirty."

"Be about right," Tennant agreed, glancing at his wrist.

"He can't have been dead more than ten or fifteen minutes, then."

I touched the fingers once more, but not the gun, which I'd never seen before. Tennant pointed to the scorched black ring around the hole. "Held right against the skull," he muttered.

The room, I thought, was exactly as we had left it. *No!* My eyes fell on Bill's portable typewriter, next to the radio. It was uncovered, and it hadn't been when we left. And in the carriage a sheet of white paper stood up stiffly. I said: "Tennant, just tap and see if the girls are all right, will you?" Then as his head vanished round the door jamb I took three steps to the machine. My own name stared back at me: Dear Nile . . . . I slipped the sheet out of the carriage and buried it in my jacket pocket as Tennant returned.

"Everything under control, I guess. *Now* what?"

"Now I'll get the Law," I said. "Er, this telephone's broken. Will you keep an eye on Ona? I'll take Joan along with me."

He nodded. "I'll keep an eye on her," he said. "You make it fast—if you think the Law is indicated."

A moment later I ushered Joan out. Sliding down in the cage I saw her eyes full of questions. "Telephone first," I said, "but not from this house. The main thing was to get you away. I don't know how far to trust Tennant. He could even be the murderer himself."

"Murderer?" she said, incredulous. "But Bill had the gun in his hand!"

"Darling, it smells. Badly. Explanation later."

The tall thin Negro from the garage straightened as we came up to the Ford. "Theah she is, boss," he said. "All okay."

I TIPPED him and he shuffled off. I unlocked the car and we got in. I made a U-turn and turned right on the main boulevard and coasted down a couple of blocks to where a sign said PADDY DOYLE'S TAVERN and I stopped the car and we got out and went in. Spotting a telephone booth, I pulled Joan into the telephone booth after me and squeezed the door shut. It was twenty-nine minutes past one.

Joan said, smiling, "Now what? Not a frontal attack, I hope?"

"Not quite yet." The operator's voice answered my nickel and I told her the

Just as the knifelike cruiser passed beneath us, we leaped together (Chap. XI)

unlisted Manhattan number I wanted. I waited until an indifferent voice said in my ear:

"Yeah?"

I said: "Nile Boyd, John. Where's the Colonel?"

"Harya, Major?" said the voice, the indifference flowing suddenly clean out of it. Colonel's in Washington right now. Till eight or nine or ten in the morning."

"You'll do. Write this down." I gave him Bill Kerr's name and address. "Got it? He's the fellow's been doing this writing for me."

"Yeah. I know."

"Well, he isn't going to do any more. He's dead on the carpet at that address. Dirty work at the crossroads, though they've tried to make it look like suicide." I gave a brief account of the evening. "I want you to see that some of the boys get over there right away, and you'd better notify the local Law too, hadn't you? This is the first report on the thing, made as soon as I could get to a phone. Can do?"

"Yeah."

"Get going, Johnny, will you? And I'll keep in touch."

I hung up, looked down at Joan's wide eyes, and grinned. "I don't suppose," she said as we emerged from the booth, "that a lady should ask who you were talking to, but I'm asking. You sounded very official, in a funny way."

"That," I said, "I have decided to tell you all about. But not here. The big question to be settled at the moment is: Where do you spend the rest of the night?"

"I could go home. But I'm not going to."

"That's fine. Your mother will have sixty-nine fits, though."

"Do her good," said Joan calmly. "Besides, she knows I'm with you. Darling, where shall we go?"

I thought for a moment. "It can't be far," I said, "because at four o'clock, or four-thirty at the latest, I have an important appointment. How about the Seaview, over near Columbia Heights? I can get the subway from there into Manhattan."

Which is how it was decided. The night clerk at at the Seaview seemed pleased to see me. I said, "Frank, Miss Adams is driving down the Island with me in the morning. Can you give her a high, quiet room with some sort of view? And see that her car is taken care of? It's just outside."

Frank said that he certainly could. I said, "I have to go to New York after a bit; but perhaps I'd better register too. So that I'll have a base to start from in the morning. I'll come up and smoke a cigarette with you now, Joan, before I start. If I may?"

The bellboy threw open the door of 1042. When he had gone, taking Joan's car keys with him, I double-latched the door. Joan said: "Nile, do you really have to leave me?"

"I really do, beloved. As I shall now proceed to explain."

"Then wait," she said, "till a lady can powder her nose. She won't be long."

While I waited I wasn't idle. I was repeating, over and over, Bill's last words as set down on the typewriter. This is what was on the paper:

Never a single instant, sweetheart

Promise your comrade, enchantress, never to entertain regrets.

I never thought how indescribably sweet, honey—or unutterably shameless—elusive

Apparently he had made three tries at a farewell note to Ona, and discarded them all, for he had typed an impatient row of x's through each of them. Then he had left five or six line-spaces blank, and written, down toward the center of the sheet, these words:

Dear Nile:

Sorry. You'll have to tell Ona good-by for me. I hate to do this, but believe me—it's the best way. For yourself, keep punching—as I know you will.

BILL

That was all of the message and yet it was not all. Hidden in those brief casual lines there was, I felt in my bones, something which I, and I only, was supposed to understand.

III

CONCERNING my acquaintanceship with Joan, I hadn't known her so very long, perhaps seven or eight months. I had met her, over cocktails, in the late summer of 1941, and since then, we had been together as much as I, at least, could contrive. But it never seemed within a million miles of being enough. For what with her Motor Mechanics course and her USO work and her other admirers—Well! She was busy. And I was busier, especially after I got going again for the Colonel.

The story behind *that* arrangement can be summarized very briefly. I was a columnist for the New York *Evening Telegraph* until the early spring of 1941. Then suddenly, as the result of a series I did on America's place in the war, I wasn't just a columnist any longer. I was doing a hectic and gruesome job of work for Washington, with the Colonel as my boss. That job ended, with Washington and the Colonel both pleased, and I returned to my ordinary routine. Then on Sunday afternoon, December 7, the news flashed from Pearl Harbor . . .

I left for Washington the next morning. The Colonel was pretty busy. He said I'd hear from him, but it wasn't until February that he said he could use me. I was to be one of a new super-secret group of G-2-B agents, working directly under the Colonel. And my immediate assignment was the problem of stopping the new and ghastly convoy-losses . . .

Naturally, I wasn't going to be able to continue with my column. Yet since I was to operate incognito, as it were, the column ought obviously to continue. So it was that I looked up Bill Kerr and met Ona. I took Bill aside (on my second visit) and spoke bluntly. Would he "ghost" for me for a month — two months — perhaps more?

"Certainly not," he had said. "First place, I'm very busy right now on a play for Ona; second place, I wouldn't know how. What the devil are you up to, Nile?"

I made him give me his word of honor never to tell; then I told him. He hesitated, and then said all right, he'd try. So, even though I might be working twenty-five hours a day on a suspected information leak in Florida, my columns appeared regularly under a New York dateline. And swell columns they were.

I told Joan most of this, omitting the exact nature of my assignment, between two-fifteen and two-forty-five on that Saturday morning. "So that's how it stands. I have no business whatever to be telling you this, darling. But it happens that Bill's death while you were in the party pulls you smack into the mess with me. I am morally certain that he was killed because he knew too much, just as I'm certain that his note is a clue to *what* it was he'd found out."

"And Ona?" Joan asked. "Does she know what Bill was doing for you?"

I said, honestly: "That bothers me, of course. I can't tell. *No* one is supposed to know but Bill, the Colonel, the owner and editor of the *Telegraph*, and myself. *No one!*"

"But the man you talked to tonight. He must have known."

"I don't count him because he is the Colonel's bodyguard. Name of Steel. Which reminds me that I said I'd call him."

"Wait just a moment. You haven't told me yet exactly what this hush-hush job of yours is."

"Nor shall I. How do you like that?" I picked up the telephone and gave the operator the number I had given earlier in Paddy Doyle's. Steel's voice said brusquely: "Yes?"

"Boyd, Johnny. Any word? I'm talking through a hotel switchboard."

"Yeah," he said eagerly. "Had a call about ten minutes ago. Everything under control."

"Fine. I'm on my way into town now. I'll try and see you before four. Okay?"

"Right," said Steel nonchalantly, and hung up. I did the same. I said to Joan. "Darling, *please* wipe that wounded-gazelle look off your beautiful pan. Do you think I *want* to leave you?"

"Do you think," she said, "I want you to? And who, by the way, is it you are going to desert me for? Some big bouncing blonde like Helen Watkins?"

I couldn't help laughing. "If you only knew," I said, "what the person I am going to meet will look like, you'd laugh too. She is a male, to begin with. I've never seen the lad in the flesh; only a photograph, but that was a honey. Middle-aged, and quite toothless. There will be a three-day stubble of beard, I imagine, and an overcoat buttoned with a safety-pin at the neck to conceal the absence of a shirt. There are probably old newspapers wrapped round the middle, and cardboard stuffed in the broken toes of his unspeakable shoes."

"I don't believe a word of it," she said. "Shut up, and kiss me."

Which I did.

* * * * *

It was twenty minutes to four when I reached the Colonel's suite at the Biltmore, which was right next door to my subsequent destination. Steel's red truculent face was grinning at me as I shook his hand.

"I can't stop, John," I said. "I'm in a hurry to get over to the station. You know about that? All right, then. Shoot with your news on Brooklyn."

"Ed Lonergan, from our downtown office, called at three, an' I told him what you said. The local Law is handling it."

"Did you tell Lonergan anything about me?" I asked.

Steel looked shocked. "I just said I'd heard you were a newspaperman, and I thought maybe I could help get hold of you. Thing to do on that is, wait for the Colonel."

"All right. Except this." I handed him Bill's message. "It's double-talk, John, sure as you're born. Figure on it while I'm gone, will you?"

He said in a low voice: "Which one of 'em you meeting in the station? Some o' these G-two boys are new in the East here."

"You know this one. You showed me his picture. The one you call Jake."

At twenty-five past four (I could see the clock through my lashes) I was lying on a bench in the waiting room of Grand Central, my eyes apparently closed. A large Lieutenant-Commander sat down momentarily near my head and lit a pipe. But he had hardly got it going when he seemed to remember something, and he got up and stalked away.

Three and a half minutes later a frightful-looking object sat down where

the Lieutenant-Commander had been. It wore a dirty greenish cap, its overcoat was something that any self-respecting garbage-wagon horse would sniff at even in a blizzard; and its face was obscured by reddish pig bristles which covered everything but a thin beaked nose and two very bright eyes. The neck of a bottle protruded from one of its pockets.

A whisky-bass voice said, "Mister, you got a spare butt?" I didn't move.

Stirring artistically, I sat up and stared around. "Cigarette? Sure. Right here." I fumbled in my jacket pocket, pulled out a flattened pack of Chesterfields. I held it out to him in my right hand, with my forefinger and second finger spread out across the top to form a V. Without hesitating, he put his thumb and third finger down through the V and pulled a cigarette out. But he pulled it out in a curious manner, because as he did so, he spread his own forefinger and second finger to form a V of his own.

"Want a light?" I said.

"Yeah," he said, and stuck the cigarette in his mouth. "Oh dear." A white-haired man on the far side of me stirred restlessly in his sleep. "Wanna li'l drink?" the toothless man demanded.

"I—no, thanks."

"You gimme cigarette, I give you li'l drink. Wha' say, pal?"

"You can't drink here, you know," I said. "Cops'll run you in."

He stood teetering, solemnly. "'S right," he said. "Washroom: ash ansher!"

"Yes," I agreed, "you could probably down a depth-charge there. Here, I'll show you where it is."

In the washroom a somnolent Negro was sweeping around the cabinets, the doors of which he had propped open. Otherwise the room was empty. The Negro's brush strokes went further and further away.

"You're Boyd," stated my companion in quite a new voice: clipped, self-assured.

"Yes," I said, "and this is a great pleasure, Jake."

He grinned. "Take the envelope out yourself. In the coat pocket next to you."

I put my hand in, felt below the greasy glass of the pint bottle slanting there. Paper crackled. I pulled it out, slid it into my own breast pocket. "That goes to the Colonel direct, of course," he said sharply.

"Of course. Within five minutes. When and where do I see you again, sir? I'm assigned to you as of four-thirty this morning."

"Know the Navy Yard district in Brooklyn? Forty-eight-B Sands Street is a *bistro* run by a Greek. Meet me there around noon. I *think* I'm on the trail of something fairly good." Something was tapping on the stairs. My companion said loudly: "'S very good of you, mister. I'll do the same for you some time."

The white-haired ancient who had lain beside me on the bench was tapping with a cane, feeling his way down the stairs. He wore dark glasses now over his bony cheeks, glasses which hid his eyes completely. Yet somehow I felt quite certain that, whatever else he was, he was not blind.

BACK at the Colonel's suite in the Biltmore, I said to Steel, pulling out the envelope, "Well, he got there. Quite a lad, isn't he?"

"He's all right, they say," Steel said, unimpressed. "I s'pose this stuff is in code." His thick fingers were extracting three or four smudged sheets of cheap ruled paper. "Yeah!" he affirmed bitterly. "Now I got to decode all this before the Colonel gets here."

"Terrible," I said. "My heart bleeds for you, you bum. I am to meet Jake again at noon at Forty-eight-B Sands Street, Brooklyn. That's all I know." I sat down heavily on the bed, feeling at long last a little weary. And in that moment, one of the telephones rang.

That is another of the instants which I shall remember till I die.

Steel answered. "Yeah? Who is it?" Then an expression of intense surprise seemed to distend his whole face, and he held out the receiver. "Lady. Can't hardly understand her. Says she wants to speak to *you*." He covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "You give anyone this number?"

A sudden thought too frightful to bear exploded in my brain. I snatched at the receiver. "Hello. This is Boyd."

The sound that my ears heard was like nothing human, and yet it was Joan's voice, midway between a moan and a whisper. "'ile!" it said. "'ile!"

"This is Nile, darling." I felt sud-

denly icy cold. "What's wrong?"

"Nile: be very careful. I'm at—"

Then came a sharp sound like a hand smacked hard against flesh, and a soft anguished wail. A different voice, a man's voice, said. "Y'hear your girl-friend, pally? She didn't sound so good, hey?"

I stabbed my finger frantically at the instrument as my eyes met Steel's; my lips formed the one word "Trace!" He nodded and sprang into the next room as I said: "Where is she and what do you want?"

The thin laugh seemed to bring all the blood in my body to my head in a rush. "Right now she's on the floor," the voice said. "She don't like havin' her arm twisted—*hey!*" This last to some companion, then the voice went on: "We just thought you might like to hear from her. We *got* her, see? So you better play ball with us from here in."

"You leave one scratch on that girl," I said, "and you'll wish you'd never been born. If you want anything out of me you let me talk to her again first."

"Why, we'd love to, pally," said the voice mockingly, "only it'll have to wait awhile because she's fainted. You wouldn't be thinkin' of havin' this call traced, would you? You just hold everything for five minutes and you'll hear from us again."

The line went dead.

Steel's round face in the doorway was like a stone mask.

"No go," he said heavily. "Call was too short. They got a friend of yours?"

I swallowed, and nodded. "John, if you ever did your stuff, do it now. I can't think."

Steel grunted. "All right. Give."

"I left her at the Seaview," I said. "Room Ten-Forty-Two. Just after I called you first. The second call was from that room."

"How'd *she* know this number?"

"She heard me give it, both times I called. They made her talk into the phone just now. She was—in great pain. Then the man's voice said he didn't want to be traced, he'd call here again in five minutes."

"Yeah," said Steel. "If they're pushing her around, it'll be in some joint of their own. Now they'll go out and ring up from some pay-station."

The telephone rang again. I answered.

"Now look," said the same voice. "We don't wanna wreck the girl; what good'll that do *us*? Except Dopey Benny here; he gets a kinda kick outa stuff like that."

"Go on." Steel's ear pressed close to mine against the receiver.

"What we want," said the voice, "is a li'l talk with *you*. All by your own sweet self. Is this your own apartment?"

My heart jumped. They still didn't know, then, where I was; only the unlisted number. "Yes, it is," I said. "It's between Fifth and Sixth on Fifty-sixth Street. But you wouldn't want to come here, I imagine, not if you want any privacy."

"Now we're gettin' places," said the voice approvingly. "Okay. You come right back over to Brooklyn, and get out of the subway at Rindge Boulevard. Got that?"

"Rindge Boulevard. Right."

"You walk down the Boulevard three blocks, toward the Edison plant, till you come to a gin-mill. It says FRANK'S on a sign. Got it?"

"Go on."

"That's all," said the voice. "You stop right outside. You'll get your directions before you've waited very long."

"Oh. You mean you want me to come over right now?"

"Be there at six-fifteen, pally. And don't be late. Or it'll be just too bad about the little girl."

CLICK went the line again. Steel said quietly: "You can't do it, Major. Plain suicide."

"Suicide?" I repeated dully, and he went on:

"Like shootin' ducks in a barrel. A nice old-fashioned set-'em-up-on-the-spot, Chicago style. 'Hold still a minute, mister, while I mow you down.' "

"They don't want to talk to me, then?"

"This is the brushoff for you, for keeps. They prob'ly figured your friend Kerr was on to something, so they rubbed him out. Then they figured he might have told *you* something, so they're goin' to rub *you* out. As soon as they can catch up with you, that is. They must have lost your trail. Grabbing the girl was a way to pick it up again."

I thought that over. "How the devil

did they know we were at the Seaview, though?"

"How about the back seat of the car?"

Light dawned. "I—yes, quite possible, John. Someone curled up under the robes there. Only I remember I locked the car."

"Might have picked it out while it was standing outside when you called me first. Was it locked then?"

"No. They'd have a case-hardened nerve, though."

"So the guy jumps in the back while you're inside calling me," Steel suggested, "an' pulls a robe over him. You ride him to the hotel. Did you put the car away yourself?"

"No. I left it outside. The hotel people put it away."

"Easy, then. For him. He just steps out while you two go inside."

"Why didn't he catch me when I left? Oh." I thought back. "I went out by the side entrance, aiming at the Borough Hall subway. That's why they missed me then."

"Sure. Then they imitate your voice, or whatever, and get the girl on the phone and some way or other they get her away."

"Yes," I said, excited, "and finally she calls the number she's heard me give twice, hoping I'm here, and I am here. Only I don't think she said what they wanted her to say, because I think she started to warn me—and they slapped her down."

"But they still want you," Steel said solemnly, "more than ever now. So they call you again. *Suicide!*"

My wristwatch read 5:32. "John," I said, "I've got to go, and you know it. Maybe you're right, maybe you're wrong, but either I go where he said or I go dippy."

Steel glanced at a little gold traveling-clock and reached for the telephone. "Wait a minute," he said. "Hello? This is Steel, sis. Have the doorman or somebody get the Colonel's Caddy out of the hack line and in front of the door in four minutes, will you? Okay."

He hung up and I said:

"You're not going to drive me over, if that's what's on your mind. You heard what the heel said about anyone coming with me."

"Quiet!" he threw back at me. "I gotta think."

IV

WE CAME out through the Biltmore's Forty-third Street entrance at a quarter to six, and climbed into the Colonel's Cadillac. Steel had already called the downtown Federal office before we'd left the room and issued some cryptic instructions.

"Here's what we'll do," he said ticking off the items on his fingers. "You get out a block this side of the subway stop. You cross the road and duck into the westbound entrance and pay your nickel and cross over and come up out the eastbound exit. That's just in case anyone is waiting there to check, which I doubt. Then you walk down to Frank's, like he said. Then comes the hard part. Standing there waiting. Because they'll come by, and they'll try to mow you down. Think you can take it?"

"I can take it."

"Keep your eyes open. That's about all I can tell you. If you should see me anywhere around, don't recognize me. Got a gun?"

"No. Stupid of me."

"It don't matter," said Steel.

We shot out over the Williamsburg Bridge. Steel had taken a curious weapon from his coat pocket. It looked something like a Colt *Woodsman*, only this was a thirty-eight. Steel slipped the last cartridge back and there was a low click as he gave a short satisfied sigh. I stared. The gun had vanished, yet I hadn't seen it go.

The car veered sidewise, stopped. "Nice goin', Jack," Steel commended the driver, and to me: "Cross the street, here, and walk a block to the westbound entrance, like I said. Okay, Major?"

"Be seeing you," I said.

Rindge Boulevard is a wide, straight thoroughfare. The Edison plant chimneys thrust slim fingers skyward on the horizon directly ahead. Emerging finally from the eastbound subway exit, as instructed, I went toward the chimneys, not running, but not moving slowly, either . . . One block . . . two blocks . . . The smudged black-and-tan sign that said FRANK'S BAR was hanging across the third cross street, perhaps thirty feet away.

I slowed my pace and looked casually over my left shoulder. Not an eastbound car in sight. I stepped off the near curb

and walked with firm steps to the far curb and regained the sidewalk exactly in front of Frank's sign. I reached in my pocket for a cigarette. While my cupped hands holding the flame obscured my face for a moment, I let my eyes rove left and right.

Frank's place was a corner saloon. The cross street, which intersected with the boulevard where I was standing, ran up over a weed-grown hill and disappeared. Beyond Frank's place was a used-car lot, and beyond the car lot were a couple of grocery stores and then another cross street. There were no traffic lights at either of the intersections visible to me. The boulevard traffic whizzed past endlessly, without stopping.

I straightened my shoulders and threw away the match. Steel? I could see no sign of him. Suddenly I saw something else. A large black sedan was cruising at an easy thirty toward me, hugging the curb. I wondered, in the second before I turned back to face the street again, who lived over Frank's saloon? The ramshackle frame building had two stories, and a couple of shuttered windows like blind eyes broke the expanse of gray clapboards directly above my head.

The black sedan was thirty feet away, twenty feet . . . .

I stepped toward the dubious shelter of a telegraph pole; I had one glimpse of a swarthy face bent forward over the steering wheel; then, incredibly, the car was past and half way to the next block and nothing had happened.

Well, they almost got me. "Keep your eyes open," Steel had said.

Fifty feet behind the black sedan a squat gray Cadillac came rolling. My eyes turning back from the sedan took in the gray car at almost the moment when it drew abreast, and in one instant I realized three things: that I had seen this car before, that its rear right window was open, and that the snout of a Tommy-gun was thrusting out at me.

Legs folding under me dropped me behind the barrier of a metal trash can at my side as a sheet of flame obscured the gray car's shape. The trash can's iron sides seemed to explode as the staccato pounding of machine-gun bullets slammed it up against my face. A giant hand snatched my hat from my head and something hit my left foot like a sledge hammer. At the same moment there came, from right above me, another sound, twice repeated:

Bang!
Bang!

SPRAWLED on my side on the pavement I heard a high shrill scream. The gray car leaped forward crazily and from the next intersection a huge ten-ton truck lumbered out deliberately into the Cadillac's path. There was a shattering smash. The gray car reared up like a stricken tank and flopped over on its side. A blur of motion resolved itself into a door pried part-way open; then a small dark figure wormed itself out and took three swift wavering steps, bending over as it dodged.

Bang! said the gun again from between the closed shutters above my head, and the figure fell forward on its face.

"Papa Joe's!" I found myself saying. I didn't mean Papa Joe's, not really; I meant the garage next to it. That was where I'd seen that squat gray Cadillac before. I pulled my feet under me and heaved myself upright. Steel's voice behind me said: "Nick you? No? Boy, you were born lucky!"

He was standing with both hands plunged in his coat pockets. I said, retrieving my hat which had a scorched double hole in it, "That was the best shooting I *ever* will see."

A policeman came running past us, blowing a whistle. Two men had jumped down from the seat of the truck and were bending over the small dark figure at the curb.

Steel said: "We get right in here," pointing behind him, "and we go away fast."

I turned, surprised. The Colonel's car had drifted up to the curb and the door was swinging wide for us. We got in, and headed back the way we'd come. I said, "Where will they know where to take us?"

Steel said: "You don't think that truck just happened to be there, do you? There's a couple more guys with 'Expert Marksman' medals inside it right now. Hotel Seaview," he told our driver and we picked up speed.

"How'd you get in and upstairs?"

"Easy," he said. "There was a back door. First skeleton key I tried opened her up."

"I very near let 'em get me. I was watching the black sedan."

"So I noticed." The tone was dry. "She made a nice smack when she hit, the Caddy, didn't she?"

"Wonderful. So that was what you were phoning about at the Biltmore? Ordering out the truck. Who was in the gray car, besides the one who got out?"

"Just him and a guy with the chopper in the back. I hope I didn't hurt 'em too bad. We want to make 'em talk."

"We've *got* to make them talk."

"Now, now!" Steel said quietly. "We'll go to Borough Hall police station, which is where they're taking them, but we better hit the hotel first."

The hotel was a washout. Frank said that Miss Adams had had a telephone call about four o'clock—a man's voice had asked to speak to the young lady who had checked in from a Ford sedan a little earlier. Miss Adams had come downstairs and asked whether there was a taxi stand nearby. Frank had dispatched the night porter to get her a taxi, and she had driven off a couple minutes later. Was anything wrong?

"Perish the thought," I said. Then speaking low, I told him that my fiancée had evidently been kidnapped, and that I was putting Federal men on her trail. I added that it was vital that he forget he had ever heard of me, or of her. Then I turned to Steel and said: "Johnny, we'd better take a look at her room. Maybe she left some sort of word there."

But Joan had left no word. In the car again, we slewed round two successive left turns to the Borough Hall police station.

"Hi, Eddy," Steel said to the desk sergeant. "Where you got the bright boys from Rindge Boulevard?"

"Well, well, if it isn't Johnny Steel in person!" They shook hands. I was introduced. "Right through the back and down one flight, Johnny," the sergeant directed. "And I'll tell 'em you're coming." He picked up the inter-office phone as we followed his pointing finger.

Three or four chairs and a table stood in one corner of the downstairs room, and in the middle of the floor, on stretchers, lay two men.

A white-coated interne was with them, watching them intently. He said, as we came through the door, "This fellow here is conscious now. He's shamming. Look at his eyelids."

He pointed a toe at the larger of the two men, whose large, yellowish face had a faintly Eurasian cast.

"How about the other lug?" said a hatchet-faced detective in a worn blue suit.

The ambulance doctor said: "Dunno, yet. I just gave him a depth charge that would wake up an elephant. Wait a couple more minutes."

A LITTLE man dressed with almost painful neatness said, "Hi, Johnny. We beat you to it."

"We hadda stop off," said Steel, nodding toward me, just as the smaller of the men on the stretchers stirred one leg and groaned. Suddenly his eyes opened, wide and staring, like the eyes of a terrified rat. I wondered which of the two men would crack first.

"All right," said a tremendous voice. "Now let's hear you two make some sense." A huge police lieutenant moved two paces nearer the Eurasian. "Or would you rather have a crack in the puss?"

The pitted yellow face did not move, but the eyes opened slowly. "Say!" exclaimed another voice from among the blue uniforms. "If that ain't Chinky Ellis I'll eat him. Used to handle a gun for that Detroit mob."

"Your name Ellis?" the lieutenant snarled.

The saffron mask nodded.

"Well, now," said the lieutenant, "ain't that nice? My name is Heffernan of Homicide, and maybe you've heard of me, too." He turned to the ratlike man. "What's yours?" he demanded, then the ambulance surgeon whispered that the jaw was broken. The lieutenant snorted, whirled back to Yellow Face. He said: "All right, then, *you* do the talking. What's *his* name?"

"Tony Savoit."

"Whose Caddy was it you were in? You got just three seconds."

The Eurasian closed his eyes, waiting. I said, because I couldn't wait, "Lieutenant: I saw that car about half-past twelve this morning in a garage a couple of doors below a gin-mill called Papa Joe's. Over near Cross Court."

"That'd be Maione's place," the hawk-faced detective muttered. "Shall I shoot over there, Loot?"

"And bring him in," Heffernan agreed. The hawk-faced man went quickly out the door.

John Steel said: "Lieutenant: name of Steel." Heffernan glared at him. Steel flipped his lapel back and Heffernan glanced at the little button underneath and said grudgingly: "Well?"

"Lemme have a word with you," said Steel. The two of them stood in the corner of the room talking in voices too low to be overheard. Then I heard Heffernan say: "I get it, I get it!" And they both came back.

There was a new tension in the air, as Heffernan again bent over the Eurasian. "Listen, you rat. I haven't got all day. Maybe you don't *want* to get well, huh?" For such simple words, they had a quite terrible sound. Then Heffernan straightened suddenly and addressed the others like a surgeon in an operating theater. "Now remember, all you fellas, the punk did this himself. We found him that way in his cell."

The big yellow face was suddenly as wet as though it had been dipped in water. The greasy voice said. "Wh-what do you want to know, Lieutenant? The Caddy was Vic Maione's. It was this way. We . . ."

* * * * *

That was at half-past seven. At half-past eight, Steel and I got out of the Colonel's car at the corner of Forty-third and Madison and headed for the Biltmore elevators.

He and his colleague, Ellis had said, were employed by the garage owner known as Victor Maione to do occasional driving and odd jobs for him. He had been summoned by Maione at around four o'clock that morning, and told to dig up Tony Savoit and report for duty at five-thirty. He had done so. The two had then been instructed by Maione to take the gray Cadillac and drive slowly down the Boulevard past Frank's place, timing themselves to arrive at fifteen to twenty minutes past six. The description of me which they had been given was accurate and they had been told that on no account must they injure me. The idea, Ellis had added hastily, was simply to give me a good scare.

After the receipt of two bullets from Mr Steel in his right shoulder, Mr. Ellis had, as we knew, voiced a loud, bitter outcry. Savoit had tried to make a getaway but, as we knew, had been first blocked by a truck, and subsequently shot through both legs, to say nothing of breaking his own jaw. Further, deponent could not carry us. It remains to add only that the hawk-faced detective had got to the garage just a little too late. Mr. Maione seemed to have been suddenly called away.

Steel and I got out of the elevator and walked fast down the long hall to the Colonel's suite. Steel said to the man guarding the door: "Any phone calls?"

"Yeah, about fifteen minutes ago. Some guy wanted to speak to Mr. Boyd. I said like I was told to—that Mr. Boyd was out but he might be back later, would they leave any message. But the guy just hung up."

Through the door I heard a telephone ringing. Steel and I piled into the room.

"Let me, Major," he said quietly, and picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

THE voice at the other end wasn't what I expected: it was clear, staccato. "Yes, *sir!*" Steel answered, and pulled his heels together as he straightened mechanically. "You comin' over here, sir?" The voice snapped words I couldn't catch and Steel said "Yes, sir," again and hung up. "The Colonel's at La Guardia now," he said. "He'll be here in twenty minutes."

They were an endless twenty minutes. I was in the bathroom, putting iodine on my lips, when the Colonel arrived. "He's in a jam: he's inside there now," I heard Steel say, and I came out through the bathroom doorway toward the tall figure.

"Hello, Nile," he said, forcing a cordial note. "Glad to see you."

He tossed a heavy brief case on one of the beds and sat down on the other.

I said: "I've given Johnny a busy morning, and not been too good company. You've never met my fiancée, Joan Adams: the immediate trouble is —they've got her!"

The sudden immobility of the long spare figure was more striking than any gesture could have been. "Details?"

I gave them to him as fast as I could. He interrupted only once, at the point where I was telling about our arrival at the Seaview and my subsequent departure.

He said sharply: "You got there a

little after two; apparently you didn't leave till three or later. What the devil were you doing in the meantime? Just what did you tell her?"

"Not very much. Nothing that matters."

"No fencing," he snapped. "Does she know you're on this job or doesn't she?"

"I—yes."

The Colonel said coldly, just one word. "Why?"

"Well, she was dragged into the Kerr mess through no fault of her own, and it seemed to me only fair and just that she should have some idea of what it was all about."

"I disagree with you," the Colonel said. "Go on."

I went on. When I finished he snapped: "Where's Kerr's letter?"

"Here," I said. He ran through it once hurriedly, then started to read it again. "Has Steel seen this?" he demanded.

"Yes, sir, Colonel," said Steel.

"And neither of you make anything of it?" His eyes went back to the page in his hand. "If this is true—" he said in the same flat voice. "If this is true . . ." Then suddenly there was death —murder—in his blazing blue eyes.

"Get out!" he snapped at me.

I stood motionless, staring at him stupidly.

"You heard me. Get *out*! You're through. I can't use you any more."

"All right. If you want to put it that way. I did *not* give any details. She only knew I was doing a job of work for our Intelligence."

"Which is what we moved heaven and earth to prevent *anyone* knowing. Which is one reason why your friend Kerr is dead. Which makes you much more of a liability than an asset. Good-by, Boyd." He added, seriously, "And thanks very much!"

I don't remember the trip down the hall, I don't remember ringing for the elevator. The next thing I recall is being in the lobby and staring at the round red face that was barring my way.

"Listen, Major," Steel was saying. "Gimme just a minute, now."

"You got wings?" I said. "How'd you get here?"

He grinned. "Hadda give the service car the old emergency dang-dang. In about five more minutes, the Colonel is gonna be feelin' a little bad about the way you bounced off. I know him. He is a softy at heart. *An'* he happens to like you."

"So I gathered."

"Major, listen. You don't know the half of it. *I* been through the mill. I *know* the Colonel. Where you goin' now?"

I said, "How do I know? You got any suggestions?"

"Okay, here's a thought. *I* never told it to you because I missed you. I'm gonna go right back an' tell the Colonel it's too bad, I tried to catch up with you to say good-by but I missed you. But if I was you I'd keep on seeing *Jake*."

"Jake?"

"Sure. You may not be officially workin' for the Colonel right now, but there's no law to keep you from droppin' round to that place you were gonna meet Jake. Shoot the works to him. Tell him we're gonna have to have this phone number changed. Tell him as soon as the new number comes in, we'll let Charley Muland know. Then if he says so, you or he or both of you call the new number an' I'll be right here an' I'll let you know how things are comin'. Got a gun?"

"At home."

"This is better'n nothin'." He produced a blue-steel automatic from his side pocket, slid it into mine.

I said, much moved, "Hope I can make this up to you some day, John. You know what I think I'll do between now and noon? I think I will go and see this fellow Tennant."

That was at a little after half-past nine.

V

EXACTLY half-past ten I pressed the button outside Tennant's doorway. The hallman had sent up my name, and the door opened instantly. Tennant stood there with the big gray Shepherd at his heels. He was wearing a stained camel's-hair dressing gown.

"Hi, Boyd," he said briefly. "I overslept a bit. Come in. Coffee?"

"Thanks," I said, and he closed the door behind me as the dog sniffed at my heels.

It was a one-room apartment, sparsely furnished. The Murphy bed had been up-ended into the wall but it had evidently been done hastily, because an edge of the sheet was protruding. A

leather saddle chair near the window was flanked by a smoking stand on one side and a kind of combination desk and bookcase on the other. The whole place, apart from this, was barren, austere, monastic. But it had a most magnificent view. The casement window was wide open and I could look down across a couple of hundred yards of bare brown lawn to the gray-green waves which lapped just beyond the Shore Road. We were almost at the narrowest point of the Narrows, where the usual tangle of ships was anchored.

I said: "You get your money's worth of scenery, all right. How'd you make out with the Law?"

"Sit down," he said. He was rummaging behind a door which evidently hid a kitchenette, for he emerged with cups and saucers and began to pour coffee for me from a Silex which sat beside the armchair.

"Thanks," I said. "I—er—was held up last night, or I'd have been back earlier. Any startling developments?"

He poured himself coffee and sank back into the saddle chair. "No," he said. "At least, none that they told *me* about."

"What happened?"

"Oh, I suppose it was just the usual. They talked to Ona and me separately, and took yards of photographs. Ona was quite wonderful. I thought she'd crack, but she didn't. And the fellow who questioned me was all right. Very little I could tell him. Though as I said to him, it's obvious that I, myself—theoretically speaking—*could* be the murderer. Ha!"

The laugh grated on me. I said quietly: "Are you?"

He didn't care for that. "Just what," he said, "prompts that question?"

"You," I said, somewhat disingenuously. "You just mentioned that it was a physical possibility."

He considered me carefully, then grinned. "Bosh! I rose to that one in great shape, didn't I? Well, I am *not* the murderer. And I would certainly like to get my hands on him."

"Has Ona any ideas on who it was?"

The powerful shoulders shrugged. "Dunno. If she has, I didn't hear 'em. I asked her if I could telephone for her—some relative, some woman friend, who'd stay with her, but she said no. She'd rather be alone. But apparently the Law didn't like that idea. I gather they fixed her up in one of the vacant apartments here in the building."

"What time did the Law get through with *you?*"

"Around half-past three," he said. "That's why I'm a little behind-hand this morning."

"Any telephone calls? Or visitors?"

The hard gray eyes focused sharply on me. "None. Why?"

"Curious," I said musingly. "In a round-about way, I met a fellow who said he'd phoned you early this morning. Fellow named Vic Maione."

My eyes were watching for even an eyelid flicker, but there was none. "Vic who?" he said. "Whoever he is, he's a liar."

"I guess he is, at that," I said thoughtfully. "Tennant, you were at the table while I was dancing with Miss Adams. What did Bill say, if anything, when he left?"

"Didn't say anything. You know how he was: always drifting hither and yon as the spirit moved him. Spirits would be more accurate."

"Yes," I admitted. "Might have wanted another quick one at the bar, without Ona's eye on him. Which still doesn't explain why he came back *here*—or how he got in without their seeing him at the front gate. Look: you mind if I ask you a couple more personal questions?"

"Shoot," he said. "Anything at all."

"Well. You were in China. How long?"

"Out there altogether three years."

"Then you must have gone out right after you got back from Spain? Right after Eddie Turner's outfit was disbanded?"

"Yes."

"I knew quite a number of those boys," I said musingly. "Remember Red Miller?" (If he does, he's good, I thought, because I had just invented Mr. Miller.)

"Miller? Nope. Never heard of him."

"Stub Jopling?"

TENNANT'S voice grew soft, affectionate. "The lop-eared son! He and I and—was Sam Hunt around when you were in those parts?"

"Yes," I said. "He was around—for awhile." Through the open window came a far, high vibration: the hornets

in the sky were beginning their daily drone. This man is, at least provisionally, all right, I thought. "That is very good coffee," I said. "There wouldn't be another cup of it handy?"

"Certainly would." He stood up, poured more for me. "Maybe I could speed things up a bit," he said. "You don't want to twiddle your thumbs while the Law goes ponderously into who shot Bill—assuming he didn't do it himself. You could use a spot of action, and it has occurred to you that maybe at this point two heads would be better than one. *But* you don't know me from a hole in the ground; you can't even be *sure* that *I* didn't do Bill in myself, so naturally you are hesitating. But I honestly don't know whether I could be much help, Boyd, in any event. My contacts with Bill and Ona have been very sketchy."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "I gathered otherwise."

"Tell you how it started," he said. "I met Bill Kerr at one of the *bistros* along the Avenue there, late one night, and we got talking about one thing and another; you know how it goes. Case of liking at first sight. Then we discovered we both lived at Cross Court. He and Ona have both been very sweet to me. But I don't suppose I've actually seen either of them more than a couple dozen times in my life."

I said slowly: "I haven't seen Ona as much as that myself, but Bill went to school with me. I still haven't told you the worst feature of the case, from my point of view. Joan Adams has been kidnaped."

Tennant's hand holding a half-full coffee cup stopped in midair. "Say that again?" he said.

"Kidnaped."

The dog and the buzzer made simultaneous sound. "A moment," Tennant said, strode across the room, and opened the door. Ona was standing there. "Why, as I live!" Tennant exclaimed. "Come in, come in!"

I stood up. "Hello, Ona," I said.

Her cheeks were streaked and swollen and her eyes were ghastly. The bobbed light-brown hair cut in a straight bang across her forehead made her look more than ever like a tear-stained frightened child.

"Hel-lo, Nile," she said in a lifeless voice, then as though she had remembered something, she walked directly up to me and grasped my coat lapels. "Nile," she said, "You will help me? You were one of Bill-ee's best friends."

"Of course," I said. "Of course."

And at that moment the telephone on the stand beside the big chair rang shrilly.

Tennant looked at the instrument in surprise. "Who the devil can that be?" he muttered, and plucked the receiver from its cradle. "Yes? . . . Yes, it is. . . . Oh! Yes, he's right here." He turned to me. "For you, Boyd. Your newspaper office calling."

IT was my turn to feel stupefied. "This is Boyd. Who wants me?"

"Steel of the *Telegraph*, Major," said a familiar voice. "How's tricks?"

I might have guessed. "Why—er—fine, Davidson," I said. "Fine. What's on your mind?"

"You got people around, hey? I gotta do the talkin'?"

"That's right." I stepped toward the window as far as the cord would stretch.

"We had another call," he said, "about ten minutes after you left. Same fella. I put the Colonel on. Boy, you'd have sworn it was you talkin'. Colonel said he'd gone over to Frank's an' waited *an'* waited an' nothin' happened. Then the fella says, well, we better come by and get you at your place on Fifty-sixth Street, because that girl of yours is sure raisin' Cain. So the Colonel says okay at eleven o'clock."

"That's an impossible deadline, Davidson. I can't possibly make it."

"Keep your pants on. We got the whole street blocked off, with men at each end, *and* one of them trucks waitin'. Maybe they'll come by, maybe they won't, but if they do, boy, we'll sure hang on to 'em. Another thing: the Borough Hall boys dug up the driver of your girl's taxi. He says he took her to the corner of Forty-eighth and Prospect, and when she got out he saw her drop something in a letter box."

"What?"

"Yeah. Might be a note to you. So we had a fella go down to your house, but they ain't nobody home."

"Yes there is. The boy has orders not to answer the bell when I'm away. I'll call him pretty soon, Davidson, and let you know."

I HUNG up, saying: "That was my managing editor. There seems to be some mix-up at the office. I'd left word that they could probably get me here." I turned to the Dutch girl. "Ona," I said, "I was just telling Tennant when you came in that Joan has been kidnaped. I've got to hurry, so I won't go into details now. Point is, can't the three of us put our heads together and make *some* sense out of last night? First came the air-gun—then there was the face you saw at the window. Then Bill disappears, and we find him—killed. And then Joan is enticed away from the hotel where I left her, by a fake phone call. Now you must have some idea, Ona. The air-gun terrified you. Why? Were you expecting something like that?"

My eyes were not missing a muscle quiver in her face. "Ex-pecting, Nile?" she said. "Of course I was not ex-pecting. Nile, will you tell me something?"

"Of course."

"Before dinner, when Joan and I are in the kitchen, I come out to say the hare, he is ready. Bill-ee is saying something to you. I do not hear exactly what it was, but I do hear one word: 'photography.' Will you tell me, please, what it is he is saying?"

"Oh course, Ona. He was saying he felt like a heel for not having found out about your camera because he knew how you felt about photography." The pale eyes searched deeply behind mine. Could she tell that I was lying, I wondered? I went on hurriedly, saying: "One thing that puzzles me is how he ever got back to your apartment without being seen."

"Oh," said Ona. "That I can explain. You who have known Bill-ee for so long will know how very childish he is about money. Well, the bill-collectors they are all the time waiting for him, so last week Bill-ee says I will no longer come in the main entrance, I will find another way. So he goes through a service entrance, and he rides up in the dumb-waiter!"

"It seems," I said, "a kind of elaborate system, unless he did it chiefly for his own amusement."

"Wait!" she said. "That was just the one time, but it makes Bill-ee think. He talks to the superintendent, and the superintendent gives Bill-ee a key to a side door. He can come in there, and walk up the stairs, and he is home! And no one has seen him! So that is what he must have done last night."

"Yes, of course," I said. (A dumb-waiter, I was thinking; *that* is how a murderer could have escaped.)

"Ona," Tennant said, "tell him about the face you saw at the window."

The Dutch girl shuddered. "It was no face. It was just an eye. That is why I screamed, Nile. Just one eye, there against the pane, glaring at me. One—big—eye!"

This sounded simply silly. "Did it go away when you screamed?" I asked.

She nodded, then put one hand on mine quickly. "But I do not think, Nile, that that had anything to do with Bill-ee. Because Bill-ee—he kill himself. I know it! He has talked of it often—*often*. One night, after he had gone to sleep, I even went to his closet and I unloaded his gun. I was afraid he would really use it before morning."

I had to admit to myself that I had heard Bill play that suicide record off and on for years. I stood up quickly. "You could be right, Ona," I said. "On the other hand, you could be wrong. Listen, I have *got* to go and get this newspaper mix-up straightened out. But can't we meet again, the three of us, a bit later in the day? Say half-past three, right here?"

Ona said: "Nile, they were very anxious last night to talk with you and Joan. Shall I tell them you have been here?"

"Tell 'em they can reach Mr. Boyd at the *Telegraph* offices almost any time," I said ambiguously, and took my leave.

VI

JOHN STEEL'S voice on the wire at 11:30 said: "No soap, Major. These guys are maybe a little bit smarter than I thought. What does Tennant have to say?"

I said, "I'm to meet him and Mrs. Kerr at three-thirty. I can tell you more after that. By the way, did you call my house?"

"No," he confessed. "Haven't had a minute. There's something very big on, Major. Tell you when I see you."

"All right," I said, "I'll call the house right now. Then I'll phone you from Sands Street."

I fished for another nickel and got

my home on what used to be Murray Hill. I could hear the bell ring and ring: no answer. Next I dialed the *Telegraph* and a moment later heard Davidson's voice. The real Davidson, at my office.

"Dave," I said, "this is Nile Boyd, and it's frightfully important. Have I got any mail? And find out for me just when my column for today reached you."

He was one of the two on the paper who knew the whole story; he said, "Sure, just hang on." Presently he spoke again. "Today's stuff was handed in at ten-forty-five last night by your messenger. Jimmy says she was some messenger, says he didn't think you had it in you. Anything else?"

"Yes. Let me speak to Jimmy, will you—and I needn't hold you up longer." I heard him yelling "Jim-mee!" Then when Jimmy's voice piped: "Hello, Mr. Boyd?" I said: "Jim. Listen: you say a lady brought in my stuff last night? What did she look like?"

"Oh, boy!" said Jimmy. "She was a blonde, with one of those crowded sweaters."

"She didn't leave a name?" (Why the devil would Bill give my column to Helen Watkins?) "Oh, well, I think I know who it was. What about my mail, Jim?"

"It's right here. You got twenty-two letters, Mr. Boyd."

"Any with a Brooklyn postmark, stamped around six this morning?"

"Brooklyn, Brooklyn . . . No, Mr. Boyd."

I thanked him and hung up. There was one more chance: Joan's mother. I called her number now. "Hello, Mary," I greeted the soft-voiced little Negress who was Mrs. Adams' maid. "This is Mr. Boyd. Could I disturb Mrs. A.?"

"Oh, Mist' Boyd," came with a rush. "She in ve'y bad way. Miss Joan—Miss Joan ain't been home."

"Who's that? Let me take it, Mary," said a deep, masculine voice. It added, as it got itself behind the transmitter: "This is George Barrett, Mrs. Adams' lawyer."

"This is Nile Boyd," I said. "I called up to find out whether—er—Joan is home yet." Better break it gradually, I thought.

"What?" he sounded shocked. "*You* don't know where she is?"

I said quickly: "Listen, Barrett, I'm more than a little worried myself—"

"Her mother," said George Barrett, interrupting me again, "is in hysterics. As I understand it, Joan was to have dinner with you last night. She did *not* come home. Now will you tell me, please, where she is?"

The tone irritated me more than the words. "See here," I said. "I don't know where Joan is. I'm trying to find out. I think you'd better tell her mother that Joan decided to spend the night with some friends, in Brooklyn, and that it was so late she didn't like to telephone her mother about it. But *I* think she's been kidnaped. And for your private information, I may say that the United States Government, in the shape of the F.B.I., is moving heaven and earth to find her. I thought Joan might have written a note, sent some word."

"There has been no word. How soon can I see you, Mr. Boyd?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I'll call the Adams number again after lunch. Will you be there?"

"I certainly shall be—" the rich voice gathered way, and I hung up. I'd never met Mr. Barrett, but he had been pointed out to me once, and I had disliked him on sight. Furthermore, as a loudly vocal isolationist, he stood for everything I distrusted in 1942. In addition, I had an idea he was becoming much too interested in Joan.

* * * * *

The main feature of Sands Street, Brooklyn, is saloons. I came through the swinging doors of 48-B at exactly four minutes past twelve. What I saw was not at all what I expected.

The size and elaborateness of the place was what surprised me first: I had expected some frowsy cellar. But still more surprising was its aggressive cleanliness. The brass spittoons along the bar glittered like gold; two big windows giving on the street were crystal clear and the floor had been freshly scrubbed. The Greeks are an admirable people, but *this* was Teutonic in its spotlessness. I wonder (I thought) whether the real owner would be, not a Greek, but a character named, say, Hans Tausendteufel or something similar?

The bartender said affably: "Good morning, sir. What can I do for you?"

"You could whip up a whisky sour, maybe," I told him. "Mind if I sit down?"

"Anywhere you like, sir. It's a little quiet now."

"Yes. Thanks." I carried the drink over to a wall table and sat facing the door. A tiny child pushed the swinging doors back timidly and piped: "Paper, mister?" I bought a *Telegraph*. I slid the second section atop the first with fingers which weren't quite steady.

Yes. It was there. Bill's last message to the world, delivered by Helen Watkins at 10:45 on Friday night, and presumably entrusted to her, therefore, when Bill had gone down in the elevator with her and Merkley after the airgun episode. Letter From An Absent Friend said the squat black type on the grayish paper, *by Nile Boyd*. I began to read.

The first paragraph was brief. It said:

By a curiously roundabout route, I have just received a letter from an old school friend which I want to print here today. He was killed in action yesterday.

Now what's up? I wondered. The letter began:

Dear Nile:

You won't get this until after I've gone, because that's the way I've arranged things. And if this seems a faintly melodramatic way to say good-by, it's simply a proof that I'm in tune with the times. Like so many of my colleagues in what Miss Stein called 'the lost generation' I have been exceedingly dissatisfied with my life, with its softness, unsatisfying sensualism, its schizophrenic tendencies.

(It *was* suicide, I thought: it must have been . . . But in that case the phrase "killed in action" would be meaningless.)

If you want my honest opinion, it is that the sooner most of my generation get wiped off the already-too-encumbered earth, the better for mankind. So I'm not leaving (word of honor, Nile) with any special regrets. In the words of Sidney Carton, "It is a far, far better thing I do than I have ever done."

But I do want to tell you this: Standing where I stand, I think one becomes endowed with a special clarity of vision—even though it endures for a moment only. And I am sure I'm right when I say that, on the vast sunset-colored plain which I seem to see behind me, the plain on which all humanity is working out its destiny, the only structures which will endure are those which were built with the help of two very powerful Magics—the Magic called Faith. And the Magic called Love.

So I'm glad to go—if my going can help, even indirectly, to speed the new day which is coming. Take care of yourself, boy. It's been fun knowing you.

BILL

That was all.

I was still staring at the signature when I became conscious of others in the room. Three middle-aged business men had sat down in the window corner ahead of me and were having some clam broth after a round of straight ryes. The new arrivals were the first tricklings of what swelled to a stream: by half-past twelve the big room was echoing to several score loud voices. But no sign of Jake.

Suddenly one of the quiet clam-broth eaters pushed his chair back and headed toward me. "Joe!" he said, beaming fondly down at me.

THE pin-striped dark suit, the gold-rimmed spectacles, the polished black square-toed shoes—all murmured Bourgeois Respectability: quintessence of Brooklynism. But the eyes were Jake's.

"Why, you've got so fat, you old rascal!" I said, beaming back. "I hardly knew you. Sit down, boy. What'll you have?"

Jake said, nodding at his two companions by the window, "We're shoving off in a couple of minutes. But I'll have a beer with you." I gave an order to the waiter who went away, then Jake murmured: "I'm up-to-date, as of ten minutes ago. I talked with Johnny and his boss, on the phone."

"Any trace, on Fifty-sixth Street?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, no."

I cursed bitterly. "There's our vaunted Intelligence for you! Girl is snatched right out from under our noses and what is the best the old man in the Biltmore can do? Tell me I'm out!" I stopped, because the waiter came back with the beer. When he had gone again I had regained my self-control.

Then, round the edge of the glass raised courteously toward me, Jake's voice "You—blasted—fool!"

"That," I said, "I grant you. Readily. I didn't mean to throw off on you, Jake. But if you'd heard her on the phone this morning—and then to be told I was off the case entirely."

He gave me a curious look. "You're to take orders from me, beginning right now."

"You mean I'm on the staff again?"

"Never mind trying to define your position," he said, with something ap-

proaching a grin. "Details can be thrashed out later." The grin vanished, the whole face hardened as he added: "John told me he'd given you a hint."

"Of something special stirring? Yes. But that's all he gave me."

Jake leaned forward. "Then I'd better talk with you some more. But not here. Settle up, will you, and let's get out." He raised his voice for who might hear him, "Yes. I'm doing pretty well at insurance now, Joe. Drop up for a minute and see the place."

The aged waiter accepted a dollar with pleasure. Jake led the way across the street at an angle and fitted a key into a door which bore a sign: HENRY MARSHALL—INSURANCE. We went into a large, square, bare room which had a pine desk, three chairs, a typewriter and telephone, a cheap filing cabinet, and another door at the back. Also a window which flanked the street door. "My office," said Jake. "Makes a handy place to change, even if I don't do much business."

"Obviously," I said. "What's in back?"

"Bedroom, clothes closet, *and* a back entrance. Sit down. The dump across the street is German-owned. This whole section is crawling with German agents. Now hang on to your chair, kid. Invasion is on the way!"

He paused, waiting for me to assimilate. "When?" I said.

"That's what we've got to find out. But it's real, all right. First will be a series of crippling explosions in key industrial cities, then an airborne armada of suicide troops. I grant you, that the men who come against us, the fliers and the parachutists both, will be suicide troops. But think of what they can do before they die! Think of a few hundred determined men on Long Island, say!"

"Linked up, I suppose you're going to add, with the local fifth-column effort."

He made an abrupt Gallic gesture with hands and shoulders. "You see?" he said, then continued. "I won't give you the details because they don't matter. But this is right from the feedbox. Trouble is, it's so directly from the feedbox"—by which I know he meant Berlin—"that we've got no corroboration on this side yet. We've got to get some leads here, get at least a hint of the timetable, the route. That's why you're to take orders from me. This supersedes everything else. The convoy business, well, that may be tied in somehow, but as of this moment, I want you to concentrate on other things."

The telephone rang. Jake answered, listened, hung up, and turned to me a face carefully swept of all expression.

"That was Steel," he said. "The Colonel's been attacked on his way back to the hotel. He's unconscious; he's not expected to live and Steel says that—What are you staring at?"

A little dark man who had halted outside to glance in through the dusty window had pulled his arm suddenly out of his jacket pocket, and had drawn it back in an immemorial gesture. What he held in his hand was round and dark.

"Duck!" I yelled, and my legs shot me sidewise in a low flat dive straight through the bedroom door at the same instant that a violent crash of glass seemed to swallow my voice. And then the noise of the shattered pane was itself swallowed in one vast tidal wave of sound.

* * * * *

A special edition of the *Brooklyn Eagle* was on the streets forty minutes later. It said:

The bomb completely demolished the premises at 53 Sands Street, through the window of which it was hurled. An as yet unidentified man who, passersby allege, actually threw the missile, was taken to Brooklyn City Hospital with both legs blown off. From remains discovered in the wreckage, it is feared that Mr. Henry Marshall, whose insurance office felt the full force of the explosion, also lost his life—

All of which was quite true. It was also true that, miraculously, I myself escaped injury. Some time later, at a gas station, I was on the telephone, talking to the Biltmore.

First came Steel's voice. Then mine answered. "This is Boyd, Johnny. Fellow just threw a bomb through Jake's office window. Jake's dead. I'm all right. I ducked in time."

"Go on," Steel said.

"Jake had just got through telling me about the Colonel—your phone call—when it happened. They probably think I'm dead too, if anyone knew I was there. What hit the Colonel? And John: *did* he tell anyone what he made of that cipher message?"

"I dunno, Major. He was on the wire

to Washington before he left to go up to Fifty-sixth. He started back from there, I understand, and a car got out of control and mashed him against a wall. It was a plant, all right. I told you those boys are really smart."

Steel-tipped fingers at my heart again. "If he *didn't* tell anyone, Johnny, we may be right back where we started. You done anything about calling my home?"

"Yeah. Tried twice. No answer. Things are blowin' up pretty fast here right now. You better come straight in."

"I know. Jake told me, just before the bomb. I'll be with you in no time at all, but I'll stop at home first and maybe I'll just look in on Mrs. Adams. Won't take a minute. Okay?"

"I guess so. What else you know about the bomb?"

"Nothing. All I saw was a little dark man who pulled something out of his pocket and threw it. Mills bomb, I'd say, or a home-made imitation of one."

"Funny," said Steel reflectively. "I don't think he meant it for Jake. I think he meant it for you."

VII

AT ten minutes to two, I paid off a taxi at Park and Thirty-sixth, and walked a few hundred yards to my own door. I slid my key into the keyhole, let myself in, closed the door quietly.

The cool, dark mahoganies of my front hall glimmered at me. On the table was the morning's mail, evidently, neatly arranged by the boy, Epictetus. I scooped it up, riffled through the letters.

Nothing! Nothing that mattered. "Epic-*tee*-tus!" I called. But only echo answered. I went into the living room, sat down on the divan and began to think furiously. . . .

In the beginning there was Jake—no. Jake came later. In the beginning there was no noise except a windowpane smashing and then a hole in the ceiling. *Therefore* an air-gun. But why the shot at all? I can see, I thought, no possible purpose except a *warning*, either to Bill, or to Ona, or to both. Seems a cumbersome method but there it is, provisionally: Warning.

Next we have Ona's scream at Papa Joe's. But there was no one in the street when I looked. Her story of an eye was, in my opinion, a lie. She screamed because of something else, because of something that Tennant was telling her, perhaps. I reconsidered Tennant. He of all people, would have been a perfect natural for getting Joan out of the Seaview. "Hello, hello there. This is Hank Tennant. I've just had a message from Nile—it's terribly important. Get a taxi and drive to thus-and-such and let the taxi go and we'll both meet you. Right?" That sort of thing. Joan would have fallen for that (I thought), hook, line, and sinker.

At this point I went upstairs and began taking off my clothes. Back to Tennant: take, for example, the matter of timing. Ona screamed in the *bistro* at around 12:30. Bill was lying dead in front of our eyes about 12:50. We met Tennant in the hall outside the Kerrs' apartment at, say, 12:45. It took Bill at least five minutes to type that note, and certainly six or seven minutes to walk (or even run) down to Cross Court from Papa Joe's. Assuming that he left Papa Joe's just before 12:30, he couldn't possibly have finished the letter until 12:42. We met Tennant at 12:45 and he said he'd already banged at the door and been walking up and down the hall. Well, obviously the times overlap: either Tennant killed Bill or he heard the shot. I could see no other way. . . .

I got under the shower.

But why should he sit at his typewriter writing a "suicide" note. I could think of only one reason: because, by acquiescing in the murderer's demand (a demand backed up by the killer's gun already at Bill's head), Bill would gain a chance to tell me something of such immense importance that he judged his own life as nothing. And this conclusion was supported by the Sidney Carton reference in his last newspaper column. Bill had died for his country as truly as any mud-smeared infantryman hurling his body at the attacking foe. And if this were true, Bill must have seen death coming. Because he obviously must have had the column written before Joan and I stepped out of the elevator to dine with him.

I toweled briskly, put on a clean shirt. My mind began to race fast. Kerr learns something, I thought, something

to do (probably) with photography. The enemy suspect he has learned it. A warning is issued. Either he does not comply or it is already too late: somehow, by someone, he is enticed back to his own apartment. There he is propositioned for one last time, and he turns the proposition down and is killed. But it dawns on the enemy that Kerr has had a chance to comunicate his suspicions to Boyd. But they miss Boyd when he leaves the Seaview, so they snatch Joan and, learning from her of a number where Boyd might be found, they arrange the Tommy-gun act from the Cadillac.

This fails. So they pull a fake appointment on 56th Street; but they net the Colonel instead. After that—the bomb. *Was* it meant for me, not Jake? It could have been. But in that case they probably think I am now dead.

I finished knotting my tie and glanced down at the contents of my coat, which I had piled on the dresser top.

There wasn't much: my wallet, three or four old letters, the little automatic which Steel had lent me, an envelope on which I'd scribbled from memory Bill's farewell note. It was a long narrow envelope, and I had set the words down one under the other in one long column. Thus what now met my eye was the following:

Never
a
single
instant
sweetheart
(That was the first crossed-out fragment.)
promise
your
comrade
enchantress
never
to
entertain
regrets

(That had been the second try.)

THEN I suddenly saw what the Colonel had seen instantly: the oldest, simplest cipher of them all. The X's which had blotted out the first lines meant that those were the lines where the real message was hidden. Then one word under another . . . It threw the first letters of each word into sharp prominence. My eye skimming down the vertical line spelled out the message:

N-a-s-i s-p-y c-e-n-t-e-r

Well, the third letter should obviously be "Z," but the phonetic spelling was just as clear. *Nazi Spy Center.* I went on down the column:

I
never
thought
how
indescribably
sweet
honey
or
unutterably
shameless
elusive
I-n t-h-i-s h-o-u-s-e

Nazi Spy Center In This House! Cross Court? Then why hadn't Bill told me?

Because he'd just found it out—and he *did* start to tell me, when Ona interrupted. Yet he had suspected *something* before last night, or he wouldn't have written that column.

I stood up and looked out the window. A man was leaning against a tree. He was smoking a cigarette and staring fixedly past my house, toward Park Avenue, which meant that he could see every flicker of motion at any of my windows without moving more than his eyeballs. He hadn't been there when I came in; of that I was certain. I didn't like it.

Well, I thought, watcher or no watcher, the first thing is to let Steel know the message. I backed away from the window and thought I heard a board creak in the hall. I whirled to face the open bedroom door and nothing happened.

My telephone stands on a little bedside table. I took three steps toward it, hand outstretched. But the hand stopped in mid-air. Like a severed black tendon, the telephone cord, jerked loose from its connection, lay curling lose on the carpet beside my foot.

Well, there was no doubt now. At the very moment when I had learned the secret for which Bill had died, the secret which might give me a clue to Joan herself, I was cut off, and a prisoner in my own house!

I strode swiftly back to the window. The man was still there, and staring up the street. His presence meant only one thing, I reflected. I *had* been followed every step of the way. No: it might mean merely that someone had been

keeping an eye on my house from a convenient vantage point, and had dispatched this current watcher as soon as I was spotted entering my front door.

Could this vantage point have been inside this house itself? Could the hidden observer have reported my arrival by the very telephone which he subsequently cut? Was he inside here still, waiting for me?

My eyes returning to the bedroom doorway narrowed at the thought. Every moment counted, and it would be asinine to waste ten minutes in an elaborate gumshoe act in an empty house when I ought to be making my getaway. Yet it would be equally bad if I let undue haste spoil everything. But when you have to act *fast* under extreme tension, you find it hard to make the simplest decision. I thought: Give up, Boyd, that conscious effort to make decisions. Keep your eyes open, your intellect alert, but let your subconscious take charge.

First I tiptoed toward the bedroom door, with Steel's little gun in my hand. I paused, just inside the jamb. There was no sound of breathing in the hall outside. I put my head carefully, around the jamb and the hall was quite empty.

My own clothes closet was six feet away. I got a good grip on the handle and wrenched the door open.

The closet was empty.

Empty, I mean, except for the two things I wanted from it: another jacket and a fresh pair of crepe-soled shoes. Balancing first on one foot, then on the other, I got my shoes changed in a matter of seconds. I stood up straight, settling my toes firmly. Then I slipped on the the odd jacket and pocketed what remained on the bureau top. Hat: where was my hat?

I found it was on my head.

Now what? Three alternatives presented themselves.

One: walk straight to the front door and out into the street. Take a chance on being blasted down. No. That was too risky now that I was the sole remaining hope of safety for Joan and most likely, the sole remaining decipherer of the secret Bill had died to pass on.

Two: Sit down, and stay sitting until I had formulated a complete plan. No. Obviously intolerable, the waiting—apart from the pressure of time.

Three: Try the roof, and hope that, as yet, they hadn't got it covered.

ON THE whole, this seemed the best idea.

The roof of my house is, like that of all the houses in that block, flat. Together the roofs form a fine sky line promenade, as it were, broken by low brick parapets. You get to the roof by one of those ladders which descend on pulleys when you pull a cord. The ladder is on the third floor, in a cluttered storeroom.

Thirty seconds after nodding a "Yes" to myself at the roof idea. I was tugging gently at the cord. The ladder swung down slowly, without the faintest sound. I let its lower ends touch the floor gently.

It was a well-made little ladder, of seasoned hardwood. None of the rungs squeaked. If anyone were waiting on the roof, there would be no forewarning of my coming. The leaded-glass skylight directly above my head was a lovely opalescent blue and I put my fingers against the glass and tilted it up by fractions of an inch until I could see a dazzling band of daylight. I repeated the process on all four sides of the skylight.

So far as I could tell my eyrie was empty. I gave the skylight a good hard shove, my knees straightening at the same instant propelled me up the last ladder-step, and I stood on the roof.

I replaced the skylight and began to run. Running soundlessly in my crepe soles, I leaped the low brick parapets one after another. But soon I would have to stop or go hurtling on down into Madison Avenue.

I don't know why, in stopping, I should have jerked suddenly sideways. Something atavistic, I suppose. Yet it saved my life. For just as I jerked, a steel hornet went *zzzzzzing* past me and as I dodged back a second hornet sang past on my other side. I dodged again, quickly, behind one of the slim clusters of chimney pipes and looked back. The skylight which I had just replaced was tilted up a very little.

Someone was shooting at me from beneath it, shooting at me with a high-power air-gun, for I had heard no sound but the bullets' sound! Another bullet went *clang* against the pipe by my shoulder and I fell flat on my face.

The row of low parapets hid me momentarily. The marksman might think he'd hit me.

Near the top of this particular parapet was a narrow slit. I lifted my head slowly, and I got my eye to the slit. What I saw then was quite horrible. My skylight was lifting slowly. Then out of the opening scrambled a long, thin figure which semed to be covered with mangy hair. It was like a man-sized rat. . . .

It was indeed a man-sized rat. It was the man in the ragged fur coat, the blind man, who had lain on the far side of me at Grand Central, who had come tapping down the washroom stairs with his cane just after I had left Jake.

He came toward me now across the rooftops, his gait a somehow obscene scurry, lifting his lean legs high as he came to each parapet. He still carried his cane but he was not tapping with it now: he carried it under his arm as a sportsman carries a gun. And suddenly it came to me that it *was* a gun. It was the gun with which he had just fired at me; and also (very probably) the gun which had shattered Bill's window-pane.

Now the loathsome figure had climbed over the last parapet. That was the moment when I shot him. He staggered, fell, and was still. *Trick?* It could be, some part of my brain warned me. So I shot him again, this time aiming for the belly.

The bullet stirred the body a little as though someone had touched it lightly with a toe.

That was all.

I stood up. I kept my gun in my hand and went toward my enemy until I stood five feet away from him. He didn't stir but I couldn't take chances so I shot him again, twice, between the eyes.

Then I picked up the cane and laid it beside my own gun, and bent to my loathsome task.

Five minutes later the front door of my house opened. A tall, thin-looking, fur-coated figure with white hair, black glasses, and a cane came out and down the steps. The watcher under the tree turned his head ever so slightly; then, apparently satisfied, turned it back again. The figure went tap-tapping down the street toward Madison.

I know, because the figure was myself.

VIII

SUCH was the situation at exactly half-past-two. At three o'clock I stood on two narrow planks which led across a kind of moat of dun-colored water and banged my fist hard against an immense metal-sheeted door. Nothing happened, so I banged again. The East River almost at my feet was a rippling blue-green carpet. The door slid open. The man silhouetted against the gloom inside looked a little like Popeye. He said in a rich Scandinavian accent:

"Ay tank you ban Fire Department. Vat you vant?"

"Looking for Mr. Muland," I said. "Is he here?"

The old man stepped back. "Come in," he said. "Ay see."

He threw open another door at the back of the entryway and led me into an enormous sail loft. My guide raised his voice in a foghorn bellow: "Sharleeee!" he yelled, and a blond, dungareed giant of about forty, at the far end of the loft stood upright, and came toward us.

Charley Muland, sailmaker: now where, I wondered, would he fit in this gallery?

"I'm Muland," he said in a powerful, pleasant voice. "What can I do you for?"

"My name's Boyd," I said. "Steel sent me. You got some place where we can talk?"

"Sure, sure. Come in the office." We passed Popeye and turned off the dark entrance into a dim little front room. "I got a guy comes in once a week to do the paper work," Muland said. "Other times, not a soul sticks his snoot in here. So you can shoot with whatever is on your mind." He sat down at the desk, and pointed to a chair.

"Well," I said, tossing into a corner the ratty fur overcoat which I had been carrying over my arm and balancing my stick across my knees as I sat down, "if you need any credentials from me, call up Johnny. If you don't, let me use that phone anyway. We can go on from there."

An arm like an oak branch whipped the instrument toward me. I dialed the Biltmore number, heard Steel's voice.

"John," I said, "I am now sitting in the office of your friend Mr. Muland, and I have a devil of a lot to tell you.

First, though, tell him I'm okay, will you?" I handed the instrument back to Muland. What I really wanted was Steel's assurance that the person opposite me was realy Muland, and was all right.

"Hi, you old thus-and-such," boomed Mr. Muland. "Who is this fella you send down to see me on my busy afternoon?" He was grinning.

Steel said something crisp and forceful, because Muland's grin disappeared. "Yeah, yeah," he said. "Why, sure. Here he is." He gave me the phone back.

"John?" I said.

"Yes. You kin say anything you want, but say it fast."

I told him briefly what had happened at my home. "The big thing," I concluded, "is, I've got the message. The one the Colonel figured out."

"WHAT?"

"That's right. You got a copy of it there?"

"Sure. Got the original right here. Shoot, Major."

I said: "Just take the first letter in each word of the crossed out lines, the first few lines."

"Yeah . . . " His voice was abstracted now. There was a silence. Then I heard him say in a tone of awe: "This had better go to a G-Two-B this minute. I'll get a messenger right up."

"Why don't you phone it?"

He said sourly, "The way things are breakin' today, I dunno whether even my own wire is tapped. An' Colonel Margate is due right now to take over. Maybe I better hold this decoding of yours till he gets here."

For the first time since I'd known him, Steel was indecisive. "You do whatever you think best, Johnny," I said, "only get that message in the works. Thing now is I can't sit here bothering Muland all day. I'm going to hie myself over to Brooklyn again to see my dear old pal Tennant. I told him, see, that I'd be there around three-thirty. I'll be a little late but not too late. And maybe I can learn something that will help."

I became aware, as I talked, of Charles Muland's eyes fixed on me with an expression to which I couldn't give a name. They were brilliant eyes, a bright Scandinavian blue. "Okay," Steel said. "Only I'd suggest you talk to Muland a couple of minutes before you go. He's a very good man, and might have some ideas."

"I certainly will," I said. "And the minute I've got anything to report, I'll call in again." I hung up and turned to Charles Muland. "Thanks," I said. "Couple of things I'd like to put up to you. You ever happen to hear of me? I don't want to bother you repeating stuff you know already?

He shook his head instantly. "So many new guys in this. Like to step out for a drink? I kind of gathered you're on your way now, anyhow?"

"Sure."

HE bellowed something through the loft door. A moment later I was crossing the narrow plank bridge with him behind me.

It was a tiny hole-in-the-wall of a bar, a block and a half from the loft. Its patrons were all apparently seafaring men, and a lone buck private looked badly out of place.

"Couple of double snorts, Joe," said Mr. Muland to the barman, "and bring 'em in the back, will you?" We sat in salt-aired semi-darkness in a little back room.

"You knew Jake, of course?" I said.

"Sure."

"He's dead. This afternoon."

"Yeah?" He seemed not surprised. "You been working with him?"

"Not directly. I've been working on the whole convoy situation. With the Colonel. You on the same end?"

"Yeah. Sort of. The sail loft's a handy cover."

"Sorry we haven't met before."

"Same here."

We raised our glasses to each other, and drank. "What I personally have been concentrating on," I said, "is the way this new submarine pack or whatever the devil it is that's out there, seems to get word. Because there can't be such a lot of people who know when a convoy's scheduled to start."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," Charles Muland said heavily. "It's just like anything else: fella in a confidential job gets to find out something nobody else knows, it makes him feel important. Then he begins to blow about what he knows to other people—his wife, a barkeep, his sweetie." He suddenly leaned across the table. "Heard what

happened this morning?"

"No."

"The worse yet. Fifty miles off Montauk, so help me! They got the whole convoy! And two destroyers. . . Around dawn."

I said: "Well, it can't be just accident, can it, Muland? There can't be enough submarines in the German navy to keep *that* kind of watch. They must know we're coming. They must have got word."

"Hey, pipe down," Charles Muland said, "You tellin' *me* about pig boats? After the time I put in on 'em?"

"Sorry."

"Not that y'ain't right about their knowin'," he said. "Their big subs have a ten-thousand-mile cruising radius and subs can stay out from home base maybe sixty to ninety days. It takes 'em three weeks to cross the ocean, and three weeks back. That gives 'em say four weeks average for actual hunting. But at any given moment, there's only one-third of 'em doing the hunting: one-third is comin' west to relieve, and the other third on its way home. So they ain't strung out in one continuous line: they get word, all right, like you said. But even that don't explain stuff like this morning. Fifty miles off Montauk!"

We were both silent.

"They wouldn't have got away with it either," Muland added, "if it had been even half an hour later. There was going to be a blimp escort and planes to pick the outfit up at daybreak an' carry on with 'em. Nice timing, all right."

A hundred men struggling in icy waters at dawn! Other thousands doomed to death because planes, tanks, guns were strewing the ocean floor!

I felt a terrible wrath. But somehow my mind kept straying back to Joan.

I decided I had better go, but it came to me that perhaps I ought to acquaint Charles Muland with my problem of the moment, and see what he had to offer. I made it a brief story.

"So," I concluded, "they've got my girl, and now I'm taking a trip over to this hang-out."

"Why?"

"I told the—the wife of this friend of mine who got killed that I'd be back around three-thirty. She may have some more dope. There's this guy Tennant hanging around, and the two visitors I've just mentioned, a fellow named Merkley and his gal—live right there in the building."

Charles Muland appeared to roll himself. "What building is it?"

"You must have heard of it," I said. "It's the pride of Bay Ridge, I understand. A place called Cross Court."

The huge frame jerked like a tree hit by lightning. I leaned toward him in puzzled inquiry. Then I saw that he was staring fixedly over my shoulder. Charles Muland seemed to reach a decision, and he said: "Fella I gotta see just came in. Mind if I ask him over? He's in this racket too."

"Sure."

"Hey, Gus!"

I TURNED my head slowly and a plump, well-dressed little man with gold spectacles glanced round from where he was giving an order to the barman. It was one of the clam-broth eaters who had been sitting with Jake at 48-B Sands Street a couple of hours before.

The little man came over. Muland said, "This is Nile Boyd, Gus. G-Two-B."

"I know," said Gus. "I know." He turned to me. "How come you're alive, fella? It mighty near blew the windows out of the Greek's."

I shrugged. "Did they get the guy who threw it?"

"They got the guy. He's prob'ly dead by now."

"Any idea who he was?"

"No."

"I—er—saw Jake was gone before I got going myself. I've been having a kind of busy time since."

"I'll say," agreed Mr. Muland. "Well, we're all busy. What say we have one quick one, and blow?"

"You fellows carry on," I said. "I'll get started, thanks just the same. But Charley why did you—just now, just before you saw Gus—why did you give that jump?"

I hesitated, deliberately. Muland smiled.

"Because I didn't know that was the place you were talking about. What was in this message that you figured out, this message you spoke of to Steel?"

The tone was carefully casual. But though I had Steel's specific okay on Muland, I had no such assurance about

Gus. I thought I'd better skip the results of my deciphering.

"Oh," I said, "just a couple of what might be hot tips. Tell you about 'em when I get a minute."

"I'll be at the loft till maybe six. How about you callin' me there, say around five? I'll keep in touch with Johnny in the meantime. How's that?"

"Five is right," I said, standing up. "I'll leave that coat in your office, then. Okay? Pick it up maybe later in the day. Good-by, Gus. Glad I met you.'

* * * * *

A different porter was in the ornate lobby of Cross Court when I arrived just after four o'clock. "Mr. Tennant, please," I said crisply, swinging my cane.

"Who shall I say, sir?" he asked.

"Mr. Boyd."

He gave me a stiff little bow. Old German army non-com, for my money, I thought. Then a crackle at the wall telephone, and he said: "Mr. Tennant says will you come right up, sir."

A moment later the elevator rose gently. The cage stopped and the doors slid back. Hank Tennant, standing in the hallway, said, cordially if carelessly, "We'd almost given you up. Ona's feeling much better. Come on in."

Ona was in the big saddle chair by the window. "Nile!" she said, and held out both hands. But before I could take them her smile broke suddenly and she hid her face in them. I patted her shoulder.

"Easy, easy," I said. "I'm sorry to be late, I've had a fairly active afternoon."

"Bet you haven't had any lunch," said Tennant behind me. "How about a sherry flip? Only take a moment?"

"I'd welcome one," I said.

He shoved a chair toward me, went to the kitchenette, and returned presently with a little silver tray and three glasses. "One sherry flip," he announced, "as advertised." Ona and I each took a glass. "Skoal!" said Tennant, raising the third, and we all sipped. It was fine.

I put my glass down and said: "Exactly what the doctor ordered. What's new with you two?"

"That man was here again," said Tennant. "Fellow named Lonergan. We'd told him all we knew. He asked us to stick around till further orders."

"Nile: any word of Joan?" Ona asked.

"Not a trace. Which is one reason why I'd like to use your phone, Tennant: I want to get in touch with Merkley and Miss Watkins."

"Why? Think they can throw any light?"

"I don't know. Bill evidently gave Miss Watkins an important message to deliver, so she might be able to throw some light. Do either of you happen to know their number?"

"It's in the book," Ona said.

I retrieved the Brooklyn phone book from the lower shelf of the stand and I riffled its pages. Yes: Merkley, P.: Cross Court. . . . I dialed, and presently a suave baritone "Hello" came to my ear.

I said, "This is Nile Boyd. Could you spare a couple of minutes for me right away?"

"Certainly. I'm doing nothing more important than finishing a late lunch with Miss Watkins."

"Thanks. I'll be right over." I hung up and turned back to the others. "They're both on deck. Any chance of checking in with you again in, say, half an hour?"

"We'll stay right here," said Tennant. "You'd better finish the sherry flip."

"Right," I did so. Tennant followed me out to the elevator. "You really will be back, Boyd?" he said. "I want to talk with you."

"I'll be back," I promised.

* * * * *

The elevator descended to the ground floor. I pushed the tip of my new cane smartly against the outer door and it swung back. I sauntered out into the marbled lobby slowly. The frock-coated functionary hastened toward me.

"Can I get you a taxi, sir?" he inquired, and this was extremely puzzling. For he seemed more than merely concerned over the possibility that I might require a taxi: he was poised on the balls of his feet ready to leap at my command.

Then it came to me suddenly why. I rapped sharply with the ferrule of my cane on the marble floor. I said: "I should like to have a taxi here at exactly"—I consulted my wristwatch, holding my cane in my right hand—"exactly five minutes to five. And where will I

find Philip Merkley's apartment?"

Again I rapped with the stick. He nearly tripped over his fat legs in an effort to lead the way to the door and to point out the directions for me. "Straight across the court, sir, the entrance opposite this."

"Thank you," I said severely, and continued my stroll.

It was a handsome stick, of what looked like stout ash as far as the handle. I had examined it and its mechanism carefully in the taxicab which had brought me to Cross Court; I had even taken it apart. It held sixteen bullets .177 calibre—deadly, if they hit you in the right spot. The whole thing was a beautiful piece of mechanism, but at the moment I was not thinking of that.

For it had just dawned on me that, in addition to being a highly effective weapon, it was also my passport. The silver band below the head was decorated with a ring of finely etched swastikas, and I had no doubt that most of the important confrères of the fur-coated agent carried precisely similar canes. That was why the porter had been so deferential: anyone carting a cane like mine around was *ipso facto* an important secret agent, and to be treated with all the respect due such.

Sunlight was dazzling in the outer court. I crossed to the other wing which, as the doorman had said, had a lobby exactly like the one I'd just left. A similarly uniformed functionary advanced to meet me and I saw distinctly how he drew himself up the instant his eyes fell on the cane. I said, before he could speak, "Mr. Merkley; he's expecting me. That would be apartment number?"

"Six-C, sir."

I entered the elevator and pressed the button marked "6." Twenty-odd minutes, and my taxi would be waiting. Then, with luck, I would be out of Cross Court, away to call Charles Muland back. The car stopped. I stepped out.

Sixth floor: that was the top floor. The immense flat roof with its pennants and its flagpoles was just over my head. Should I give that at least a cursory inspection before proceeding to the Merkleys? While I hesitated, a low *click* sounded beside me and through the glass portholes I saw the elevator begin to descend.

I couldn't move. *Why?* I didn't know.

Something, some unseen director, was ordering this scene played in a different manner.... All right, I thought suddenly. Perhaps the roof *is* indicated. Perhaps there is even a fire escape angling down past the Merkley apartment.

Another click and a low whirring below announced that the elevator was climbing the shaft again. I sprinted to the very end of the hall and a steel door there said ROOF in small gilt letters. I wrenched it open and went through. It swung shut after me and I turned and held it open just a crack, through which I could look back down the hall, and the noise of the elevator stopped and I heard the doors clash back.

I leaned lightly on my cane, to steady myself, and peered through the crack. I saw coming out of the elevator George Barrett, impeccably arrayed with a gray Homburg and a red carnation. I saw George Barrett walk fast directly toward me, then pause outside 6-C and press the bell.

He stood there waiting, one hand touching his cravat mechanically. In the other hand he carried a pair of lemon-yellow gloves and an exact duplicate of my silver-banded cane!

IX

GENTLY I pushed open the roof door at the head of the steel stairs. A man was sitting easily on a glass skylight near the roof edge within ten feet of me.

"How do?" he said. "Your name wouldn't by any chance be Boyd, would it?"

"I—why—ah—yes. That's right."

"Mine's Lonergan. Steel told me about you."

"Steel told me about *you*," I said. "I started to look up this fellow Merkley," I went on, "and while I was on my way up here, fellow I know, name of George Barrett, stepped out of the elevator and rang Merkley's bell. You hear about the young woman who's missing? Miss Adams?"

"Yes. Surely."

"Barrett is her mother's lawyer. Ever see one of these?" I displayed my cane. Then when Lonergan nodded, I pointed to the swastikas. "I took it from an agent who pretended to be a blind

man: long fur-collared coat, white wig, black glasses. Know him?"

"Not by name," said Lonergan. "He's a pretty important number, though, I believe. Same like—er—Jake on our side."

"He isn't any more," I said. "I shot him on a roof in Thirty-sixth Street a couple of hours ago. Took this cane from him . . . Well, George Barrett's got a cane just like this. I just spotted it over his arm."

"Dear, dear," said Lonergan.

"I just left Tennant's place. Miss Hagen is there with him. I said I'd be back by five. Also I told Charles Muland I'd call him around five. Meantime I made a date to see Merkley. Am I clear?"

"Perfectly."

"Well . . . *Would* I be away out of order, Lonergan, if I asked to see your credentials?" I flipped out my wallet, showed him mine. He did the same by me, and I continued: "Kerr left a note to me, in his typewriter. It had a cipher message in it." I told him what it said. "I phoned Steel from Muland's place around an hour ago," I continued, "and passed the word to him. He was going to get it over to G-Two-B H.Q. right away. You suppose they'd have the place surrounded by now? Or would they wait till dark?"

"More apt to wait till just before dawn," Lonergan said thoughtfully. "You know, I *wondered*— But this is swell, Boyd!" Suddenly he began chewing on his lower lip. "See here: if this Barrettt is with Merkley—hadn't we better hurry? I'll come with you."

"That," I said, "would be a very fine idea. Let's go."

I went fast down the steel stairs ahead of him, pressed the button outside 6-C. Quite without realizing it, I brought my cane around under my arm so that it was held there firmly, with the ferrule pointing forward. The net result was that Philip Merkley, opening the door, found the moral and physical equivalent of a gun barrel pointing straight at his heart.

Except for Charles Muland, I have never seen a man jump so in surprised alarm. I said calmly, "Hello. Am I late?"

"N-not at all," stammered Merkley. "Come in."

I lowered the cane. "Mind if Mr. Lonergan comes in with me? Says he knows you."

Merkley's face was something to see; he was not d'Artagnan now. "Won't say I'm glad to see you again," he told Lonergan. "But come in." We went into a little foyer and Merkley said, indicating a closed door beyond him: "Helen's got a visitor—an old school chum. I hate to disturb them. So why don't the three of us drop down to the cocktail lounge?"

George Barrett as an old school chum made me want to guffaw. I said: "Of course, only I wonder if I might use your telephone? I'm trying to make a call before a friend of mine gets away from her phone."

I was courteous but urgent. It gave me one of the few pure pleasures I had had that day to see the panic in Merkley's eyes. Evidently, at all costs, George Barrett was not to be discovered there. "The phone downstairs is more convenient," Merkley began.

I said, in a somewhat different tone, "Merkley: this is important. Can I or can't I use your phone—now?"

He decided to hope for the best. "Why, yes, certainly," he said, and opened the door behind him. "Helen, may we—?" Then loudly: "Oh, the girls are in the bedroom. Come on in, fellows."

We went in. The telephone stood on the window sill. I crossed over to it and asked the operator for Mrs. Adams' number on Murray Hill. Mrs. Adams' own voice said: "Yes?"

"Hello," I said, "This is Nile Boyd. Has your beautiful daughter turned up yet? No? Well, when she does come in, will you tell her I called? And Mrs. Adams—have you any idea where Mr. George Barrett went when he left you? Where I could reach him now?"

This in a loud clear voice which, I thought, could not possibly help carrying beyond the closed bedroom door. At least I hoped it couldn't. Lonergan, meanwhile, was gesturing at Merkley, first decisively, then, of all things, threateningly. He was stabbing his finger now at the bedroom door, and Merkley was hesitating.

"No idea at all? Well in that case perhaps—"

NOW Merkley, evidently routed, fell back and Lonergan threw open the door without knocking. Merkley looked at me imploringly. It came to me

suddenly that my possession of the silverbanded cane must have set Merkley's mind at rest as regards myself; it would be Lonergan about whom he was worrying.

"—perhaps I'd just better keep on trying," I finished. "Thank you, Mrs. Adams," and I hung up. Lonergan was standing now just inside the bedroom door. "Wouldn't have disturbed you, Miss Watkins, except that I'm in such a terrific rush," he was saying. My eyes flicked back to Merkley's face. It was the face of a madman. He was looking at Lonergan's back. One hand was creeping toward his hip.

"I wouldn't do that, Merkley," I said.

His head snapped round. He was, quite literally, mad with rage and probably fear. I took a step toward him and swept my cane around in a swift semicircle, bringing it down as hard as I could on the slender white wrist. There was a sharp *crack* as bones splintered and a loud, high, involuntary shriek.

"You asked for it, Merkley," I said between my teeth. "Get over by that wall."

He glared at me, but obeyed. Lonergan said: "I think you and your old school chum had both better come out in the other room, Miss Watkins." He backed toward me step by careful step. As he drew abreast of me, he said, more loudly, "You heard me!" and I saw the color-drained face of Helen Watkins in the doorway but she wasn't what I was waiting to see.

"That's fine," said Lonergan encouragingly. "Now you, please—drop that or I'll drill you!"

I heard, in the ensuing silence, the very faint sound which a light object might make if it were tossed on a carpeted floor. "Okay, step out here, now," Lonergan said.

George Barrett stepped out—minus his silver-banded cane.

Lonergan said: "You are George Barrett?"

"I—yes. My name is Barrett." He missed the nonchalance he was striving for. "Afraid I haven't the pleasure of meeting you."

"Lonergan. I'm working on the Kerr case, and the disappearance of Miss Joan Adams." He bent suddenly reproving eyes on me. "You are Mr.—er—Boyd, I believe? Did you strike Mr. Merkley here just now?"

"Yes," I said, wondering where this play-acting was getting us. "I had an idea he was going to pull a gun."

Lonergan's eyes narrowed. "
you armed, Mr. Merkley?" he asked.

"Yes," said Merkley defiantly. "What of it?"

"May I see the gun, if you please?"

Merkley said: "It's in my jacket pocket. I can't reach it. My arm is broken, I think."

Lonergan inserted a delicately probing hand, withdrew a nasty little black gat. "You have a permit, I assume?"

"Matter of fact, I have. Only it isn't here. It's in New York."

"Ah," said Lonergan solemnly. "You won't mind if I keep this for the moment, then? Thank you."

The gat vanished in his own side pocket. Merkley said blusteringly, as Lonergan stepped back, "See here: you may be in charge of the Kerr case, but you can get out of my apartment. I might ask you whether you have a warrant."

"Oh, yes," murmured Lonergan. "A very special warrant. A Presidential warrant. Very hard to get, very correctly issued. . . . Would you care to see it? Of course not: you don't want to bother with that. I wanted to talk with you and Miss Watkins again about last night's unpleasantness, but I gather Mr.—er—Boyd wants to see you, too."

His voice trailed away on a delicate rising inflection: he was letting me have the next move. I said: "I did, but I wanted to see Mr. Barrett still more. I am wondering whether Mr. Barrett knows that he is, at this moment, in considerable personal danger. I am wondering, Lonergan, whether it wouldn't be a good thing for you to take Mr. Barrett into some sort of—er—protective custody. Just for tonight, of course. *And* Miss Watkins and Mr. Merkley. I doubt if they at all realize the way things really are here. Don't you agree?"

LONERGAN appeared to be thinking hard. At length he said: "I do believe you're right, Mr. Boyd. I think that would be an excellent idea." He took three steps to the open casement window. His left hand whipped a white handkerchief from his breast pocket and his arm extended through the window let the handkerchief stream briefly in the breeze. "Mr. Boyd, we can

dispense with you for the moment, if you want to carry on," he added. "I gathered you were in something of a hurry?"

I met his eyes squarely. "Then I'll dash," I said. "I'll voice my regrets later, Merkley. Sorry to be so precipitate, Miss Watkins." I opened the door. Three men, big men, all in uniform, stood outside. Cops.

"Come in, boys," Lonergan said. "And pass Mr. Boyd out. He's in something of a rush."

They stood aside. I walked past them swinging my silver-banded cane. . . .

It was ten minutes after five. A large green taxi was drawn up at the stone steps beyond the fountain, exactly as ordered. The driver glanced hopefully at me, but it seemed best to pass him up. I strolled on, up the street to a little corner cigar store where I dialed for Steel.

"It's Boyd, John," I said. "What's new?"

"Major," he snapped back, "call Muland right away, will you? I just talked with him. Call him *quick*. We're all tied up here."

"Right." I hung up, fished for another nickel, dialed Charles Muland's number. I said, "Nile Boyd, Charley. Little late. Sorry. What's up?"

"How soon can you get over here?"

"Twenty minutes, maybe."

"I'll be waiting. Only make it fast!"

Another taxi whirled me out, a few minutes later, toward the Brooklyn Bridge. I sat back a little at that point and closed my eyes. . . . The next I knew, the taxi had stopped, and the driver was holding the door open. "Is this the place you want, mister?" he said doubtfully. I glanced out and across the dull water of the moat I saw the huge dungareed figure of Charles Muland appear in the open doorway of the sail loft. I paid the driver and cantered across the plank bridge with my silver-banded cane under my arm.

"You look kind of flustered," said Charles Muland, grinning. "Come on in."

I did. Behind us the big steel-sheeted door began to slide down silently. "Little longer drive than I expected," I said.

"Go on in the office," said Charles Muland, and suddenly I didn't like his tone, which was somehow not a suggestion but a command.

"*In,* I said," the big man repeated, and now his voice was hard, contemptuous. I stood precisely where I was, with the cane tucked under my left arm, and my right hand in my jacket pocket lifted the snout of Steel's little gun till it aligned itself with Muland's big belly. I said:

"Pull yourself together, Muland. I'll go in when I get blamed good and ready. And in the meantime, I don't like your tone."

For such a big man, he was very fast. I saw the huge foot coming, and my finger tightened on the trigger in my pocket but the foot got there first. An excruciating pain flashed up my right arm, the gun went *spang* angrily, but already the kick had tipped the barrel up so that the bullet went *zip* over Charles Muland's head.

Simultaneously with the echoing metallic clamor of the shot, the giant was upon me. I hit the floor, and the world exploded into star-streaked darkness.

X

YET, amazingly I wasn't out. Then something metallic hit me on the side of my head and I drifted into gray vagueness. I was conscious only that my feet were being lifted, that something was being wrapped around my ankles: a rope. I felt my body lifted at the shoulders and feet, and myself being transported effortlessly through the air.

"One! Two! Three!" My body began to swing back and forth like a hammock, and I lit with a thump which sounded like kicking a bass drum and felt like landing on a rock pile, only the rock pile yielded slightly. Then came oblivion.

The next I knew my bed or whatever I was lying on, was tilting up, down, up, down, up, in a regular rhythm. I must be lying in a boat; a boat rocking gently at anchor. And then, as quickly as the click of a camera-shutter, I understood: I was in a boat beside Charles Muland's sail loft. I was tied up hand and foot, and Charles Muland must be *an Axis spy*. . . .

I could hardly believe it. And yet—snap out of this, dope, I told myself. "What are you going to do?"

A brief struggle with my arms and with my feet convinced me that I

wasn't going to do much of anything about it. Not unless—wait. Could I sit up? I tried, and to my surprise I found I could.

My new position extended the view, but contributed little otherwise. The boat into the cockpit of which I had been flung was, I saw now, a sleek cigar-shaped express cruiser with a low, streamlined center cabin, the entrance to which, just beyond my toes, was closed. A Browning machine-gun was mounted forward, also a big searchlight. The boat was moored with her knifelike prow pointing outward from her present narrow slip, poised for instant flight. The door of the boathouse was just a couple of feet beyond her prow.

A low clear voice from nowhere said: "Boyd! Can you hear me?"

The quivering of my body stopped. At risk of screwing my head off, I brought every nook and corner of the dim structure into my line of vision. The boathouse was empty.

My heart began to pound violently. I said, in a stage whisper, "Where are you?"

"Here, beside you. Look down!" I bent to my left, which was the side of the boat farthest away from the entrance door, and glanced over the gunwale. I don't think that ever, in my life, have I been more surprised!

Hank Tennant's dark hawk face floating flush with the surface of the scummy water stared up at me. I said in amazement, "What the devil are you doing there?"

"Gun!" he whispered. "You still got one?"

I hunched myself sidewise until I could rub the pocket against the boat's gunwale. "Gone," I whispered.

The head shook itself impatiently as one of the ripples washed over it. "Here," he muttered. and held out a small shining knife. I shook my head. "Can't reach it." I said. "My arms—tied behind me."

"Oh. Well, I can cut you loose right now," he said, speaking fast. "Then we can both swim for it. Only if that door behind you opens while I'm doing it, we're both done for. Or I can leave you here and duck out again and go get help. But in the meantime, they may do you in."

I started to say, "Beat it fast, and carry on after Joan," when something stopped me: the thought, perhaps, that after all I still couldn't be sure of Tennant. It was a good thing I did hesitate. For the door behind me creaked open, and a voice said from the landing stage:

"Well, well, if it ain't the lug in person! Only he's about twelve hours late."

I knew that sneering voice; it had conjured up nameless horrors at the other end of a telephone wire early that morning. And now for the first time I saw its owner, and he was a fine teammate of the Messrs. Chinky Ellis and Vic Maione. His was the face of some satellite of a vicious Renaissance princeling, inhuman in its cruelty. Gangster, 1942 model, streamlined.

Tennant's face had meanwhile vanished. I said, "What might your name be?"

"What's that to you, pal?" The long thin lips stretched like twin rubber bands into a quite horrible smile. Then suddenly he cleared his throat and spat expertly at me. The spittal struck me on the cheekbone and began to drip down toward my jaw.

I could only sit still. But inside I was swept by such fiery excitement as I had never known. For, at sight of him, a wild idea had hit me cerebrally as hard as Charles Muland had hit me physically: Joan was here! Here on this cruiser, on the other side of the cabin doors!

Then as if he were psychic, the creature above me said: "Well, it's gettin' dark. You won't have to wait much longer, lug." He came a little nearer and crouched. "Yes, sir, she's quite a girl." He stood up suddenly. "Or was," he added, and flipped his cigarette butt toward my face.

THE butt burned into my forehead and at the same moment I felt the cruiser roll slightly to port. My eyes flicking involuntarily in the same direction showed me no trace of Tennant, but I thought I knew what had happened: he had that instant hoisted himself aboard. Just forward of the cabin, where the cabin itself would hide him.

The Animal grinned wickedly, then bent forward to grasp the edge of the cabin as he stepped aboard. In that moment a long streak of silver light licked through the air toward him. Then

I saw the haft of Tennant's shining knife protruding like a giant-size silver collar button from my visitor's throat.

The long, thin torso was falling directly toward me. I met it in midair with my right shoulder, gave a shove and a heave. Then the thin carcass reversed its motion and slipped down, between the cruiser and the planking, into the dark rippling water. To Tennant's eyes peering cautiously round the corner of the cabin I whispered: "That was a honey—and I've knocked him overboard."

"Fine," came a murmur and the eyes disappeared. The boat heeled again, slightly: Tennant was back in the water.

When he clambered back aboard the boat again, one hand triumphantly held the shiny knife. I presented my bound arms to Tennant, felt the see-saw pressure of the cutting blade, and the ropes fell away.

"Tennant," I said excitedly, "I could be wrong, but I have an idea that Joan Adams is lying inside this cabin. Know anything about marine motors? I don't. But if we could slide that front door up and get this motor started, we could shoot out of here like a bat out of a coop."

"A thought," Tennant admitted. "A fine thought. Wait. Sit still."

The head went sliding through the water, toward the door. I saw the metal curtain between us and freedom shake slightly, then Tennant's head came pushing otterlike toward me again.

"We could do it," he reported, breathing excitedly. "There's a cord, a wire cord, over pulleys. No lock: the cord's just fastened to a cleat. Wonder if that engine hatchway's locked?"

I crawled to the square hatchway covering the engines. It moved. "Okay," I whispered, and in another moment Tennant, slipping eel-like up beside me, had vanished down the cockpit and let the hatchway down over him.

Tennant's voice said: "She's all set to go, and I can let her rip. But she starts and steers from the cabin, which is locked with a stout padlock."

"Hold it, right where you are," I said, and stepped stiffly to the planking, moved on tiptoe and as fast as I could toward the metal door. I had just noticed a large iron staple screwed to the door above the knob, matched by a similar staple on the door-jamb. Taking the rope which had bound my legs I laced it back and forth between the staples. Tennant's head protruding from the after cockpit nodded approval. "I'll hoist the front door," I said, "and we'll get going."

My left hand, unwinding the thin wire cord wound around the cleat at the other end of the boathouse, was shaking. I unwrapped the last hitch and pulled gently. Somehow I couldn't believe that anything would happen, yet silently, easily, on well-greased rollers, the great metal curtain rose into the air.

On the way back I loosed the moorings, jumped aboard the drifting boat. Tennant was waiting beside the cabin. Together, we hurled our joint weight forward against the door. Wood splintered, but the lock held. "Again!" Tennant panted. "One . . . two . . . three!"

We hurled ourselves forward again. Another splintering crash ended with a loud ripping sound as the door collapsed inward, and almost instantly I saw Tennant crouched at the brass-spoked wheel. His fingers stabbed here and there among the buttons, the throttle, switches, while his feet were fumbling for the starter pedal, and a moment later I could hear the lovely purring sound of powerful motors.

"Give it to her!" I cried, and Tennant nodded. We shot forward with an echoing roar, out of the gloom and into the golden twilight like a long gray streak of a torpedo.

Bang! My eyes turned backward across the wash of foam showed me the huge figure of Charles Muland in a window of the sail loft, with a rifle in his hand.

"Bang!" repeated the steel threat. "Bang! Bang!"

Our haste had kept my eyes straight ahead as we burst into the cabin. Now, with the Manhattan Bridge dropping fast astern, and a tugboat dead ahead hooting a brusque inquiry as to our intentions, I jerked the roll of dark-gray blankets back from one bunk. It was empty. I lurched toward the opposite bunk and, my fingers outstretched toward a similar blanket huddle there, paused at a hail from alongside. I thrust my head out through the shattered doors and a police boat throbbing along on a course exactly parallel to

ours slid a little nearer us and the cop at its rail bellowed:

"What's the hurry, Greenwich?"

I swallowed twice before I could speak; then I called: "Listen: we're U. S. Intelligence. I want to talk to you."

The square, weather-beaten face looked surprised. "Well, go on an' talk," it said. "I thought you was Cap Freese. What's he doin'? Takin' a day off?"

A stubby finger pointed at the life preserver lashed to our starboard rail and I felt a desire to laugh when I saw the black lettering on the white canvas. We were, it seemed, part of the Greenwich Harbor Patrol!

The wake of the tugboat caught us at that instant and slung me down onto the second bunk. With horror I realized that the second bunk was empty, too!

Joan wasn't there, wasn't aboard at all. And Tennant and I, between us, had just shut forever the mouth of the man who could have told us where she was!

XI

LATER that day, as we stood in the Barge office, Steel's face was ghastly pale. Colonel Margate said: "We're about set, I think." He turned to a police stenographer. "You got all that down—that Mr. Boyd's been telling? Yes? Then make a transcript as soon as possible." He turned to me. "You're sure you feel up to this, Boyd?"

Margate had reached the Barge Office within fifteen minutes of receiving a telephone call from Tennant, which was traveling.

"Oh, I'm fine," I said. "Fine! I wasn't going to miss this last chapter if I had to crash Cross Court on a stretcher. "How's the Colonel, Johnny?" I said.

"He's gone," said Steel in a flat voice, and I understood now the ghastliness of his face. I turned back to Margate.

"What about Tennant?" I asked.

"He'd better wait here," Margate said quickly. "He's still being interviewed upstairs. Let's get going."

Motorcycles waiting outside sputtered into roaring life as we came through the Barge Office doorway, and two of them took up a position as advance guard. The raid, I gathered, had been set for nine precisely. We swung out over the Brooklyn Bridge.

I sat in the Colonel's Cadillac on one side of Margate. Steel was on his other side. Steel said suddenly: "Oh. Forgot to tell you, Major. We sent some of the boys down to pick up the stiff you left on your roof, an' they give the house a good goin' over, an' you know who was in the cellar?"

"My colored boy?"

"Right. He was in the coal bin, all tied up with a busted skull. But they think at Bellevue that he'll pull through all right." He paused, then said: "What about Muland, Major? I only heard the main outlines."

I said between my teeth, "He's unconscious. Tried to make a getaway in another boat. Seems his boat didn't stop, so the sergeant in the police boat let 'em have it. Muland stopped several bullets. Which would be dandy with me, except I'd just helped Tennant dispose of the guy you and I talked to on the phone this morning. And with him gone, Muland's the only one in the world I can think of who might have told us quickly where Miss Adams is."

Steel nodded somberly. Margate said: "I imagine that Mr. George Barrett will crack before long. He doesn't seem to me the type to hold out forever."

I said: "Trouble is, do you think a man like George Barrett would necessarily even know what the small fry have been up to? I doubt if he even dreamed at first that Joan's absence had any connection with this mess. After I'd talked with him on the phone, though, he may have put two and two together, so he comes puffing over to Cross Court. But he may not have the vaguest idea where she actually is."

"Possibly not," Margate decided. "To get back for a moment, Boyd: as I understand it, your present view is that Kerr was killed by the air-gun?"

"Exactly. And for my money, the blind man did it. I think that the fake blind man, assuming he *was* the particular agent involved, must have picked up Bill in the washroom at Papa Joe's, and said 'Look, we must talk undisturbed. Let us go to your apartment.' Bill agrees, and Bill lets himself and his companion into Cross Court by the side door to which Bill has been given a key. Bill may have disclosed how much he knew, thinking that the blind man was one of our agents, and the

blind man thinks: This fellow has got to go, and at once.

"So once inside Bill's apartment, the blind man, suddenly emerging in his true colors, orders Bill—with the gun-cane at his head, doubtless—to write a farewell note. And Bill does. But first, Bill writes out the cipher-message, because now he is certain that newly aroused suspicions are justified. And the blind man pulls the trigger. He yanks out the forty-five which Bill carries, sticks it in Bill's right hand, and escapes via the dumb waiter, just before we open the door and walk in."

Margate nodded. "You're pretty close to hitting it on the nose, I'm sure," he said. "Because the autopsy on Kerr's body showed that the hole in his head was much too small for the forty-five which presumably killed him, and the bullet's exit hole was also too small. Incidentally, they haven't been able to find the bullet."

"If it was an air-gun bullet," Steel interjected, "it might have spent itself piercing the skull. Your blind man could have picked it off the floor."

"That's what I suggested," said Margate tranquilly.

FOR a while we were all silent. Then I said: "There was something I believe I didn't mention to your stenographer just now: Bill's remark to me, around dinner time, in connection with the discovery he said he'd tell me about. He said: 'Know anything about photography?' but Miss Hagen came into the room just then and we never got back to the subject. I am by no means satisfied with explanations concerning that."

"All right, Boyd," said Margate. "You stay unsatisfied. But man, am *I* satisfied!"

"With what?"

"With those records you found on the second cruiser when Muland was captured. Man, oh man!"

It was a couple of minutes before nine when we reached Cross Court. Margate, leaping from the car, stopped a military policeman and said brusquely: "Where's Major Mackay?"

"He's straight ahead, Colonel," said the M.P. "You can see him in the doorway there. They're just about to move, I understand, sir."

Margate nodded, stepped forward. Steel's voice in my ear said: "You s'pose these guys are coverin' a get-away by water?"

"By *water?*"

"Yeah. I dunno what made me think of it. Maybe it was the police chasin' that second boat."

Suddenly I got it.

The second cruiser, the one which had held the records: it *could* have been kept moored deep in the sub-basement of Cross Court itself. It could have been loaded, finally, frantically, with the records, *could* have emerged through an underground waterway, emerged beyond the Shore Road, right into the Narrows, and then it could have streaked across to Muland's sail loft to pick up Muland himself.

And if so, still another craft—the final last minute escape ship for the big shots—might be moored under our feet right now!

"Come on!" I said, and the next instant we were crossing the final narrow strip of lawn, and the sea wall of cut stone was directly ahead. I slowed, waiting for Steel to come pounding up.

"I got an electric torch," he panted, and produced it. We stood on the very edge of the sea wall and directly beneath us a great semicircular tunnel mouth yawned in the wall, a tunnel whose floor was the waters of the bay.

We lay flat on our stomachs and Steel flashed the torch briefly into the tunnel mouth. The narrow black band of water extended straight back under the broad lawn toward Cross Court, from which now came a hum of voices, audible even where we lay. Then, silhouetted against the distant lights, I saw several small black figures moving toward us. A machine-gun crew, I guessed. And at the same instant I became aware of something else: the faint but powerful purring of marine motors turning over slowly. My fingers bit into Steel's thick arm.

"Johnny!" I whispered. "Hear that? That's another speedboat coming out! We're just in time."

Together we peered back through the tunnel mouth. The approaching figures were still more than a hundred yards away. I said: "They'll never make it. Let's jump her, Johnny, as she comes out."

We gathered ourselves together on the brink of the cut-stone wall. I flexed my toes in their crepe-soled coverings:

I didn't want to slip at the takeoff and land sprawling. Then something sharp and shining slid fast out from under us as we crouched there. It was the cruiser's knifelike prow!

I have only a vague memory of the leap itself, just an impression of a dark huddle of figures crouched in the cockpit behind the cabin, figures which without warning seemed to be flying straight up at me. I struck a shoulder hard with my feet and its owner smashed to the cockpit floor with my body atop of him and I knew that I could account for this one, at least. I got him by both ears and pounded his skull with all my strength on the cleats and a resounding crash beside me told me that Steel had landed too.

"Stop her!" roared Steel in a bull's voice, and someone close to him whimpered. The motors throbbed one instant more and died. "Keep your hands up," I heard Steel mutter, and then he raised his voice again. "You in the cabin: come out one by one, with your hands up!"

I felt his flashlight being thrust into my hand. "Train it on 'em, Major," he said. The bright beam of the torch showed three more figures clustered just inside the cabin door. The nearest figure came out, hands high. A tall, thin, white-haired man with, of all things, a monocle in his carved-stone face.

"Stand beside the door," I heard Steel say, but I heard him as though from miles away because a sudden mad thought had struck me: *Could* she be *here?*

I plunged past the third emerging figure into the tiny cabin. And a voice that I would recognize anywhere, any time, said weakly: "How are you, darling? I hope you are still all in one piece."

"Why, hello, Miss America" I said. "Mr. G. Barrett has been ever so worried about you."

XII

MY impatience was difficult to endure as I stood bareheaded outside my own front door in the bright gold of that April Sunday noon. I said to myself: "Blast him, I wish he'd hurry."

I was referring to H. Tennant, who had telephoned and asked if he might drop by at twelve sharp. Then suddenly two figures rounded the corner of Park and came toward me and I stared at them in incredulous amazement tinged with righteous wrath. One was Miss J. Adams. the other was Mr. Tennant in person, swinging — *yes!* — a silver banded cane.

"Certainly luck for me," Tennant said enthusiastically, as I went forward to meet them, "to run into Miss Adams just round the corner."

"On my way home from church" Joan informed me, "and I thought, I will totter round and see how Mr. Boyd is making the grade."

"Come in, both of you," I said. "Come in and we will glance over the Sunday paper together."

I ushered them into the living room and the front page of the Sunday *Times* on the window seat where I'd left it caught Joan's eye instantly. She uttered a cry and darted toward it, and Tennant and I stood behind her, looking over her shoulder as she read:

157 SUSPECTS TRAPPED IN RAID
ON ALLEGED NAZI BROOKLYN SPY CENTER

The first bank was:

Most Important Seizure Since Outbreak of War
Says Local Intelligence Chief

The story itself began:

Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, operating in close conjunction with secret units of both Army and Navy Intelligence, last night, at 9 o'clock, swooped down on the mammoth new apartment building known as Cross Court in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, and took into custody 157 persons suspected of being members of a Nazi spy ring.

The contraband material seized included thousands of rounds of ammunition and an undisclosed number of rifles, shotguns, machine-guns and other arms. But the importance of even these items was dwarfed, the local FBI office revealed, by the discovery of a short-wave diathermy machine in the office of one of the physicians in the building. It could be readily convertible for the transmission of telegraphic signals and was equipped with a "booster" device capable of sending messages not only to submarines hundreds of miles at sea, but actually as far as Berlin. In the room with this apparatus was an indoor aerial which had evidently been rigged by an expert.

Finally, while no detailed information as to their contents has yet been released, it is understood that a complete set of records was recovered. These, it was authoritatively stated, contain not only complete plans for an impending invasion, but the names and actual photographs of members of the alleged ring, including persons whose identity, when revealed, will (in the words of the local FBI officer in charge of the raid) "rock the country."

There was quite a lot more, but much, naturally, that was missing. I left Joan and Tennant to finish the tale while I went out to the kitchen to find whether Epictetus had left me any gin. He had, and vermouth too.

I put things together on a tray and came back through the dining room into the living room in time to hear Tennant say:

"It was absolutely the finest double feat of arms I ever heard tell of, Miss Adams. The records alone are beyond price. Then, with that injured hand of his, it was grand for him to jump the other boat and get you too!"

"Oh, come, come," I said, setting the tray down. "You must learn to curb this distressing tendency to hyperbole, Tennant." Then I sat down on the divan beside the young woman and said: "We'll probably be hours comparing notes. But there are a couple of things I'd like to know at once. One is your story, my pet, of what happened after you left the Seaview—no, before that. Beginning with whoever phoned you."

Joan nodded. "The telephone business was good," she said. "After you left, Nile, I scribbled you a note, and I was just debating whether it was even worth while to get undressed when the phone rang. It sounded exactly like your voice. You—he, I mean—said would I hire a taxi at once and meet you at this Prospect Street corner, you'd come by in a Cadillac. I said of course. I took the note with me.

"It was around twenty past four when I left the Seaview. The Cadillac picked me up—I remember because I looked at my watch under a street lamp just before I mailed the letter—at twenty to five. The car door opened and I stepped in and someone grabbed me and slapped a cloth which was drenched in chloroform over my face and I passed out."

HER reference to the note made me very curious. I couldn't resist asking a question.

"Why mail the note?" I interrupted. "And where did you address it, baby?"

"To your home, here, of course. I thought it would be a pleasant surprise for you in the morning." The faint pink in her cheeks was lovely. "When I came to," she went on, "I was in this big hall, like a Bund Hall in the movies, all swastika banners and stuff. There was a telephone right in front of me. My mouth was taped but my hands were free, so I tore some of the tape loose. I remembered the number you'd called twice that night and I thought you might just possibly be there. So I called it."

"That was clever of them," I muttered. "Go on."

"I was just going to try to tell you about the mess, because of course I knew then that you hadn't phoned me at all, when someone grabbed me from behind and choked me off. He looked awful."

"I know what he looked like," I said somberly. "You ought to see what he looks like now, incidentally. And then?"

"Then he let go suddenly and another man said, 'Sit right still, toots. We want to ask you some questions.' So I sat still, and two more men came in; *I* think they were German army officers. One of them had a monocle. They wanted to know all about you: how well I knew you, how well you knew the Kerrs—oh, millions of questions. I answered them all quite honestly, because I didn't know anything at all incriminating anyway. Except—except when they came to your job. Then after awhile one of these two officers said: 'Would you care for some coffee, Miss Adams?' and I said it would be heaven sent, and the next thing I knew a fat, chunky, red-faced man was bringing a pot of coffee and I drank a cup of it fast and it tasted a little queer and I went out like a light."

Tennant and I nodded solemnly. "Must have figured she was telling the truth, at that," Tennant suggested. I said: "The truth as far as she knew it, yes. But of course, after that questioning and the abduction and all, she'd have to be eliminated. They were bound for a waiting sub, no doubt of that, when we jumped the boat last night: Joan would have been slid overboard

with appropriate weights at that point."

"There isn't much more to tell," she said as I turned back to her. "When I came to, I was on the express cruiser that was moored away underground there. You know the rest."

"Messrs. Boyd and Steel arrive," Tennant supplied. And I said: "And neither of 'em would have been in the neighborhood, Joan, if it hadn't been for H. Tennant's little throwing-knife. Remind me to tell you about *that* sometime. And by the way, Tennant," I said, "is that, by any chance, *my* cane?"

"It is indeed," said Tennant, grinning. "After you and Steel had shoved off for Cross Court from the Barge Office last night, the harbor patrol boys let me go round to the sail loft with them. To help dig up our victim *and* to reproduce the crime."

"Your victim!" I said generously. "All I did was push him overboard. Go on."

TENNANT gave a nod of appreciation and then continued his explanation.

"Well, we dug him up, all right. And when we discovered the cane in Muland's office, I thought of you, and brought it along. With full permission of the authorities." He bent suddenly and picked it up. His outstretched left hand presented it to me, crook first.

"Thanks, Tennant," I said. "I should think you could come out now, Johnny: what say?"

The curtains at the far end of the room rustled and the thick, bulging, blue-serge-suited figure of Mr. Steel appeared from behind them. To Tennant I said: "I know you won't hold this against me. Johnny got here half an hour ago, and I thought, just on the wild impossible chance, that I'd do some checking up."

"You thought that Tennant is a deep-dyed serpent?"

"No, no . . . well—yes, if you want to be exact. Though I assure you I knew better."

The faint dusky red which had tinged his dark face began to fade. "Ah, skip it," he said. "I don't blame you a bit. I have something else for you, too: a letter."

"Ah."

"Yes. It was hidden in the lining of that old fur coat, the one you left at the sail loft. They said I could bring it to you."

I said, happily, "Why, that must be your letter, Joan: Furcoat swiped it before I potted him."

"I *hope* I didn't forget it," Tennant said, and his right hand moved swiftly toward his breast pocket and Steel said loudly:

"*No!*"

The hand stopped in mid-air.

"Put 'em both out in front of you, Tennant," said Steel, and the sunlight from the front window glinted on handcuffs which had apparently sprouted suddenly between Steel's thick fingers.

Tennant didn't move. But his dark eyes were suddenly brighter than the sun glint on the metal. He was standing as I had seen him stand in Bill's apartment: poised lightly on the balls of his feet, supple and swift as any fencer.

Fencer? Deadlier than any fencer, it came to me suddenly: *his* blade could lick across space like a tongue of flame. So I shot him. With my own pet .32 revolver. In my left hand.

The little gun went *crack!* and a round black hole appeared in the chalk-stripe flannel coat just where the lapel cleared the collar bone. I saw Tennant's long body jerk and his head swing round toward me and there was a flurry of movement as Steel stepped between us and then Steel stepped back and Tennant was standing there and swaying a little and the glittering handcuffs were round both his wrists.

I didn't look at Joan, not even when more men came out of my kitchen: quiet and competent men who led Tennant away to a dark car which had slid up unobtrusively in front of my door.

"Well, Johnny," I said. "That about cleans up our particular end, Johnny, doesn't it?"

I could feel Joan's eyes on my face now, wide with questions. Then she said:

"Nile: if you don't explain I shall scream."

"Why," I said gently, "it seems that my original doubts about Mr. Tennant were soundly based, that's all."

"But how can that be?" she asked.

"For awhile, after he'd killed the animal in the boathouse, I decided that H.T. must be a hundred per cent okay,

even though I couldn't quite understand two things. One was how he happened to trail me to the boathouse. The other was how he got across the moat and into the water and under the front door all unobserved. I never did get a chance to ask him those little details, because of the confusion of the chase after that second cruiser and because the boys at the Barge Office questioned us separately. And then Steel came, and he and I were off to Brooklyn."

"But what made you change your mind? About Tennant, I mean."

"Learning that he wasn't Tennant," I said.

"What? How?"

I smiled. "As I've said, the two little points I've mentioned happened to bother me. So while the supposed H.T. was being interviewed upstairs in the Barge Office, a bunch of the boys were getting a fine set of his fingerprints off the boat. The prints went to Washington last night, and they were definitely not the prints of the Hank Tennant who flew with Eddy Turner in Spain. And so a number of things became clear; *and,* though she hasn't cracked yet, I am afraid that little Ona is headed straight for trouble.

"For my money, Ona has been in Axis pay ever since she hit this country. I think that it will be found that the supposed Tennant is one of the spies who have been landed here, along Long Island and elsewhere, in rubber boats. And I think that Bill found this out, the part about Ona, I mean, and it nearly broke his heart. Perhaps he wasn't sure, hence the final column, which—in case his suspicions proved wrong—could be glossed over in subsequent columns."

PLAINLY Joan was puzzled. There was a wrinkle of perplexity upon her brow.

"But why did Tennant save your life, then, Nile?"

"Very simple. Principle of 'the show must go on.' The actors vanish, the play continues. You see, GHQ—which is Cross Court—must have known by noon today, that it was in a tight spot. Kerr's death has focused full official

[*Turn page*]

attention on the place, which is bad. Furthermore something very strange has happened to two agents who were to remove Kerr's friend Boyd, because Boyd is still around. Tennant is now apparently well established as a returned A.V.G. hero; he has won Kerr's confidence to such an extent that Kerr babbled to him his painful doubts of Ona. He assists (no doubt) in Kerr's removal (though I still think the blind man shot Bill. Tennant was probably just the decoy duck). Anyway, GHQ must have reasoned, let us improve and consolidate Tennant's position. Let us have him make a grand sweeping gesture which will put him in solid with the Law: let us have him apparently save Boyd's life. You see?"

"Then," she said slowly, "even if Cross Court was put out of business, agents like Tennant would still be in a position to carry on." She frowned. "Nile: what did the paper mean by referring to people whose identity would 'rock the country?' Have you any notion who?"

I shook my head. The records might tell me tomorrow. "The point is that they *are* known. The fellow with the monocle who questioned you—you know who he is? He is Freiherr Ernst von Heitmann, head of Nazi espionage for the eastern United States. I have no doubt that he directed the planning and building of Cross Court—and one of the ingenious devices which was discovered last night is that swinging arm beyond the fountain: the one that swings back as you approach."

"What happens then?" said Joan.

"There is a trick camera in the porter's lodge. When that light flashes, it takes a snap of whoever is entering or leaving. That, I think, was what Bill had found out somehow. That was what he was referring to when he asked me if I knew anything about photography."

"That booster for the diathermy, though, is what gets me," Steel said. "*That* was good stuff, Major. Y'see," he added, "what pinching *that* means is, these convoy losses is gonna be stopped. Muland would relay the dope he picked up along the waterfront, about when an outfit was gonna shove off, to Cross Court, an' the boys there

would telegraph it out to the subs. Simple!

"An' there was more than that: sometimes the ship's own captain wouldn't know his route till maybe ten, fifteen minutes before leavin'. Well, there'd be an Axis man on that boat, an' as they slid past Cross Court, through the Narrows, at night, he'd shoot a quick blinker signal through a porthole. Rooms like this here Tennant had would be right in line of vision. The signal would be picked up, an' relayed to the subs out beyond Montauk *That's* all over now, believe *me.*"

"And the invasion business, John?" I asked. "You think that's out, too?"

Steel stood up, sighed heavily. "Y' never know in this racket, Major," he said.

NEXT ISSUE'S

HEADLINERS

THE YELLOW TAXI

A Dr. Westlake Novel

By JONATHAN STAGGE

I FOUND HIM DEAD

An Exciting Mystery Novel

By GALE GALLAGHER

MURDER AT LONDON'S GATE

A Scotland Yard Novel

By JOHN CREASEY

THE READERS' JURY

(*Continued from Page 7*)

daughter of a New York cop and owner of the Acme Investigating Agency—specialists in collections and skip tracing—whose troubles began from the moment a frightened woman handed her two thousand dollars and said: "Prove that Bette Alexander is not my child!"

This is an unusual novel in many ways, including the fact that the author is her own main character!

Gale Gallagher's visitor was none other than Dawn Ferris, famous radio actress. She was nervous in her talk and fear loomed large in her eyes. By deft questioning Gale obtained the story of her predicament. Pretty Bette Alexander, daughter of a wealthy family, had been kidnaped and she dreaded that Bette was actually her own child.

As strange as this fact sounded, it made sense after Gale drew out Dawn Ferris' history.

The actress had been married to a vaudeville hoofer named Eddie Wells. Wells wasn't much good and had a habit of skipping out of town without paying bills.

An Adopted Child

They'd done a double act until their baby was on the way. Then Eddie disappeared. In desperation Dawn went to a Dr. Wurber who placed babies with wealthy families. She made a deal with him.

He took care of her, delivered the baby—which she never saw—and placed it out for adoption.

Dawn never saw Eddie again though she heard from his occasionally. Always he asked for money. Then a week ago he had written to her saying he was back in New York and wanted to see her about their child.

Dawn did not know what Eddie wanted but, oddly enough, he had failed to contact her. Then had come the kidnaping of Bette Alexander and Dawn's noticing that the girl bore a certain resemblance to Eddie. And when the papers carried Bette's birth date and Dawn realized it was the same day and year as her own child she wondered if Bette really was her daughter.

She was willing to pay two thousand dollars to be assured that Bette was not her

daughter—that it was not her daughter who was in danger of her life from kidnapers.

Gale, who would have hunted elephants for two thousand dollars, plunged into the investigation at once. Her first move was to contact Dr. Wurber at his home. When she got there the place was in darkness. But a watchman, thinking she had a special appointment, let her in.

Inside Gale spent her time going through the doctor's files trying to find a record of Dawn Ferris (her real name was Ethel Wells) having been one of his patients. She was having no success when the doctor walked in on her. Though he held a gun in his fist he did not apepar to be angry. In fact, almost his first words to Gale told her that he thought she was an associate of Eddie Wells!

She took her cue from that and pretended she was Cora, Eddie's friend, about whom Eddie and Dr. Wurber had evidently had some conversation. Then, pulling a tremendous bluff, Gale told Wurber that Ed-

[*Turn page*]

die had accidentally shot himself with a gun and needed medical attention.

Dr. Wurber took the bait. He led her outside, called a cab and they sped uptown. To Gale it was an opportunity to learn where Eddie Wells was staying and what he was up to—though she had no idea what she would say when she met Eddie Wells face to face.

Accusing Eyes

She told herself she might be riding into a trap. And she couldn't help remembering the gun Dr. Wurber was carrying. However, she forgot all about the gun when they reached Eddie Wells' room and found him lying on a rumpled, unmade bed.

There was no mistaking him. He looked just like the picture Dawn Ferris had shown her. And there was no mistaking the black hole in his forehead. Gale turned to Dr. Wurber and found him staring at her. Accusation—ghastly clear—burned in his pale eyes.

Gale had never been in a tougher spot in her life. But you'll have to read "I Found Him Dead" in our next issue to learn how she wormed out of it and how she smashed

the odd mixture of romance, deceit and murder that surrounded this astounding case!

An Inspector West Novel

"Murder at London's Gate" by John Creasey, whose mystery novels have sold more than four million copies in all editions, is another stirring Inspector West story. Inspector West is new to TRIPLE DETECTIVE readers, but we wager that you'll like him as he leads Scotland Yard in a hard fight against wealthy Paul Raeburn, long suspected of being the hidden power behind numerous illegal rackets and a host of brutal crimes.

When a man named Halliwell was found dead in the middle of a road shortly after Raeburn's Rolls-Royce had gone by, Raeburn was picked up. And Scotland Yard slapped a charge of manslaughter on him when blood was found on the car and clear evidence found on the victim that he had been run over.

Inspector West, seeing a suspicious bruise behind Halliwell's ear, had ideas of hooking Raeburn with a murder charge. In fact, when he learned that Halliwell had just finished serving a three-year term in prison for black market operations, he began to see that there might be a possible tie-in between the two men.

But West reckoned without the surprising evidence of lovely Rosa Franklin—evidence that forced the police to dismiss the charge of manslaughter against Raeburn. However, West didn't give up. He was sure that Halliwell had been murdered and that Raeburn was responsible. He kept on the case and Raeburn, learning of West's persistence, fought back. The resulting battle provides a continuous round of excitement and smashing violence.

So watch for the next issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE if you want to spend some enjoyable hours reading the best in mystery fiction. Of course, in addition to the three lead novels there will be the usual

[Turn page]

fine assortment of short stories and features.

JURY JOTTINGS

BALLOTS from our far-flung Readers' Jury have been pouring in steadily and we are happy to note that our Summer round-up of cases proved so popular. Take Juror Clyde Keller of Racine, Wisconsin:

Dear Editor: Your trio of authors—Frederick C. Davis, Lester Dent and Richard Burke—in the Summer issue of TRIPLE DETECTIVE did a fine job on their novels and as a perfectly contented juror I want to thank you for bringing the cases to my attention!

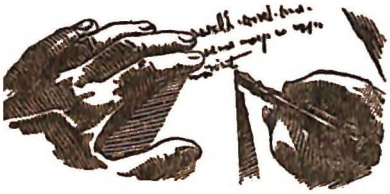
Well, Clyde, allow us to thank you for taking the trouble to mail in your ballot. Juror Sam Jones of Syracuse, New York, seems to share your sentiments about TRIPLE DETECTIVE. Here's what Sam Jones says:

Dear Editor: "Detour to Oblivion" by Frederick C. Davis which was the lead novel in the Summer issue of your magazine was an excellent story and, incidentally, served to introduce me to Cy Hatch. Cy Hatch was an interesting sleuth and I also found myself liking Cy's wife and Danny Delevan. The three of them make a good team. The rest of your issue was fine, too. I thought your true crime stories were particularly excellent.

Thank you, Sam, for your comments. We always try to provide a varied assortment of novels, short stories and features so that all our jurors will find entertainment in the magazine.

We'll see you here in the next session of TRIPLE DETECTIVE court. Meanwhile, send all your ballots to The Editor, TRIPLE DETECTIVE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks to everybody!

—THE EDITOR.



The Pitfalls of Forgery

By SIMPSON M. RITTER

NO matter how clever a forger is he cannot imitate another's hand perfectly. Forming letters similarly is only one part of copying another's writing, the easiest part, according to the experts. People hold pens and pencils at slightly different angles and not consistently, varying with letters and combinations of letters. The same is true of the pressure they exert.

About a decade ago in Wisconsin a woman died leaving behind a combination will and note addressed to her husband. At first the police were satisfied that the suicide was genuine. Shortly later, after observing the husband's behavior, they felt less sure.

Confronted by the authorities, he claimed that he had mislaid or lost the original note but still had the pad on which the death message had been penciled and on which the impression of his wife's writing was visible down to the fifth sheet.

A handwriting expert found this most startling and decided to conduct a series of experiments after obtaining specimens of the handwriting of both the dead woman and the surviving husband. By mounting a pencil in a funnel into which he poured lead shot and leading the funnel, attached to an ingenious arrangement of wheels and strings, across a sheet of writing paper, the expert obtained a duplicate of the dead woman's writing pressure. The funnel contained three ounces of shot.

He then repeated the experiment to achieve the pressure normally exerted by the husband in writing. Fifty-one ounces of shot were necessary.

The woman's three ounce handwriting brought pressure to bear only very faintly on the sheet immediately below the one on which she was writing. Like most women she had a very light hand. The husband's hand showed through to the fifth sheet like the supposed suicide note, indicating not only that the note had been written by a heavy-handed man but by one unaccustomed to writing and who therefore exerted a heavier pressure than persons who used pen and pencil commonly.

The husband was tried and convicted by the state of Wisconsin.

INTIMATE FACTS about WORLD-FAMOUS CELEBRITIES

HERE is a book you must read! The inimitable Dale Carnegie, whose great best-seller, "How to Win Friends and Influence People," sold three and a half million copies to set a new record for non-fiction, presents thirty-eight biographical gems about world-famous men and women in "Little Known Facts About Well-Known People."

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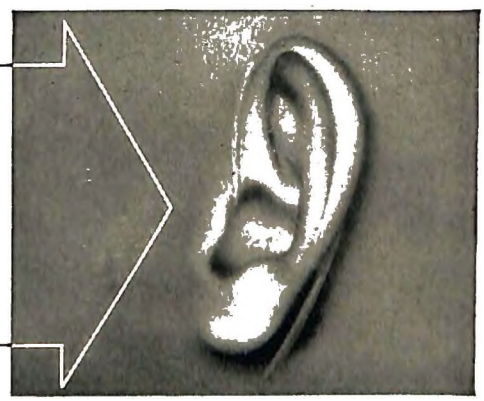

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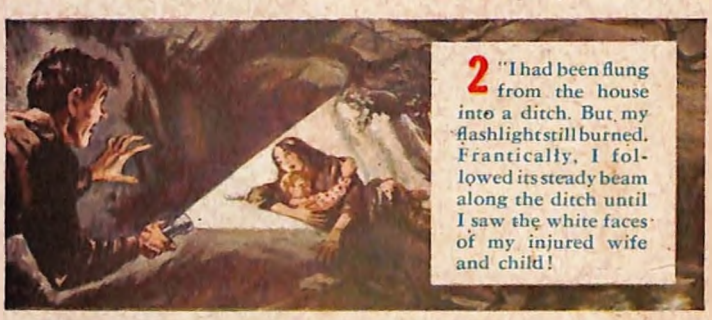
"We were caught in a wind that screamed our doom!"

A TRUE EXPERIENCE OF JAMES F. BRADSHER IN AN ARKANSAS TORNADO

1 "Near midnight, we heard it! A sighing whisper . . . a whining gust of wind . . . a shrieking blast! The full fury of the tornado struck! My wife screamed! My child whimpered. I grabbed my flashlight. Suddenly . . . the whole house churned . . . spun in air.



2 "I had been flung from the house into a ditch. But my flashlight still burned. Frantically, I followed its steady beam along the ditch until I saw the white faces of my injured wife and child!

3 "With the help of our flashlight, we reached shelter. I thank those flashlight batteries for saving three lives that night. Now I know why 'Eveready' batteries are The Batteries With 'Nine Lives'!"

Just as an active cat . . . takes a cat nap . . . and *bounces back* with new pep . . . so "Eveready" flashlight batteries recover power * between uses and *bounce back* for *extra life!*

*Technical explanation: due to the electro-chemical regeneration of the depolarizer.

THE FLASHLIGHT BATTERY WITH "NINE LIVES"!