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THE STORM**
Novel of Eerie Mystery

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LURWIT**

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MURDER
GAME**
A Gripping
Crime Novelette

By
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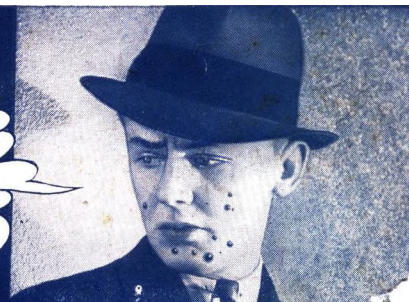
THRILLING
PUBLICATION



**THE DEAD
SPEAK ONCE**
A Novelette of
Magic and Murder
By **FREDERICK
C. PAINTON**

FRADEWALD

WISH I KNEW WHY THEY ALL TURN ME DOWN



**A PIMPLY
SKIN CAN
SPOIL
ANY BOY'S
CHANCES
FOR A
JOB**

GEE, I HATE TO TELL UNCLE JACK I DIDN'T GET THIS JOB! DON'T SEE WHERE I SAID ANYTHING WRONG EITHER—WISH I WASN'T SUCH A WASH OUT!



VM GRANT
PRES.

WELL—I'VE LOST ANOTHER CHANCE FOR A JOB—GUESS THAT'S WHY—WHAT'S WRONG? YOU LOOK AS IF YOU'D LOST YOUR LAST FRIEND ON EARTH!



ENOUGH TO MAKE A FELLOW FEEL LOW

FEELING LOW WON'T GET YOU A JOB—AND LISTEN, GEORGE, I'VE A HUNCH THOSE PIMPLES DON'T HELP, EITHER. WHY NOT TRY FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST? IT FIXED UP BOB—AND HE LOOKED EVEN WORSE THAN YOU DO!



THANKS! FOR THE COMPLIMENT!

WONDER IF SHE'S RIGHT?

LATER
WELL THEN, ADAMS—WE'LL EXPECT YOU TO START IN TOMORROW



THANK YOU SIR—I'LL BE HERE ALL RIGHT

PEG WAS RIGHT ABOUT THE OLD PIMPLES—SURE GLAD I ATE THAT FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST!

SAY, PEG—HERE'S REAL NEWS! I GOT THE JOB. SURE THING! WHAT? OH, QUIT THE KIDDING—NO, I'M NOT VICE-PRESIDENT YET, BUT I'VE GOT SWELL' PROSPECTS!



PUBLIC
PHONE

Don't let Adolescent Pimples keep YOU from getting a start

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But pimples are very apt to occur after the start of adolescence—from about 13 to 25. At this time, important glands develop and final growth takes place. The entire system is disturbed. The skin gets oversensitive. Waste poisons in the blood irritate this sensitive skin and cause unsightly pimples to break out.

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by clearing skin irritants
out of the blood



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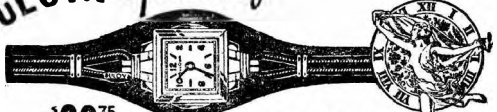
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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. XX, No. 2

HARVEY BURNS, Editor

October, 1936

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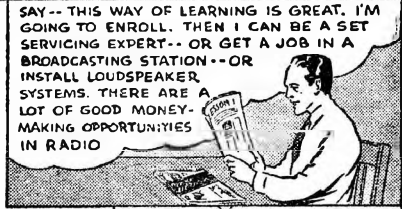
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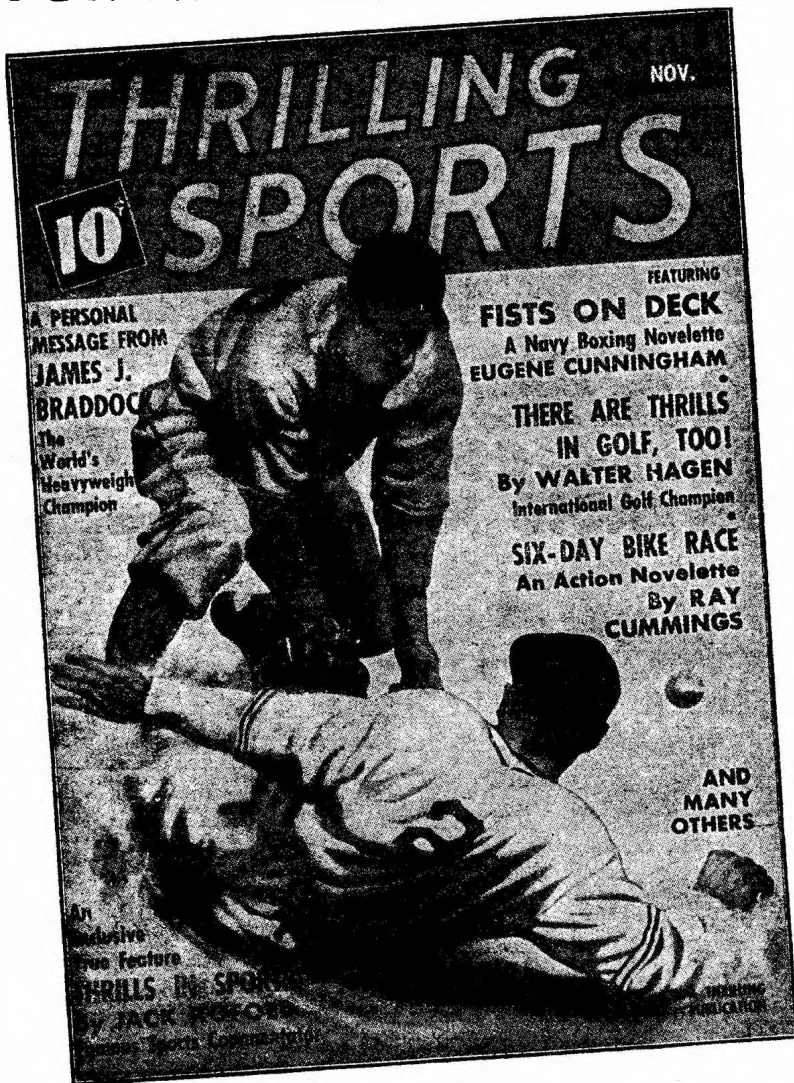
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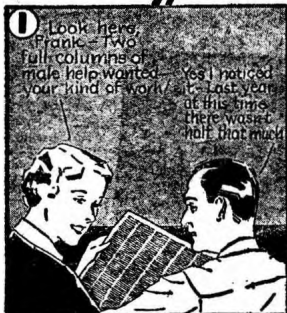
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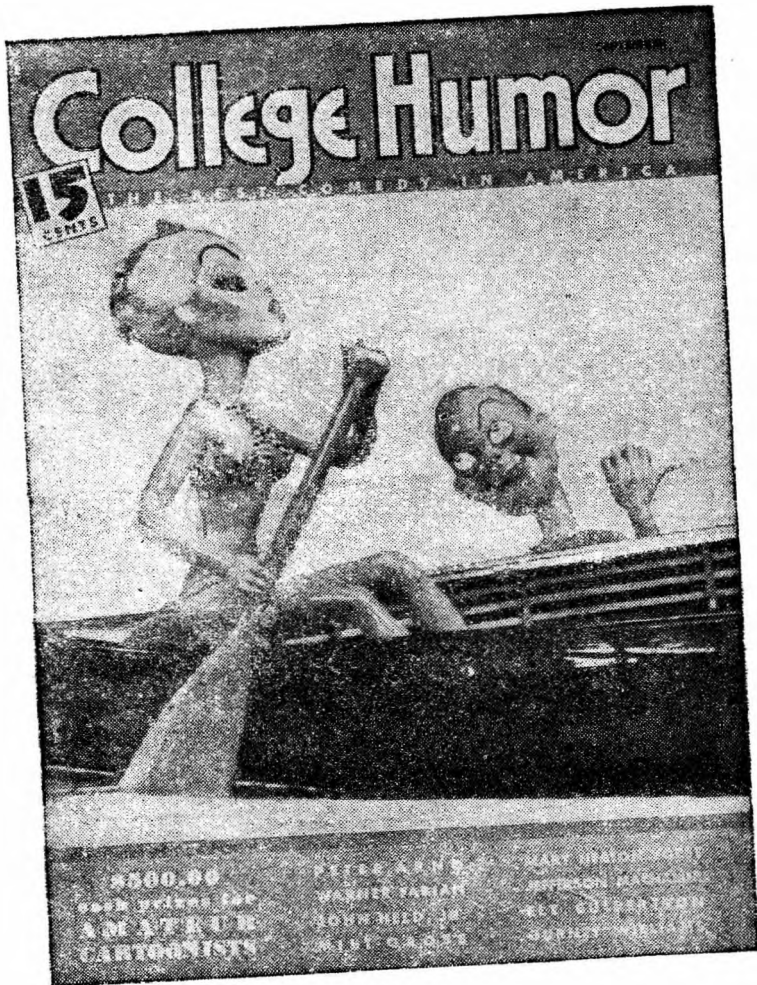
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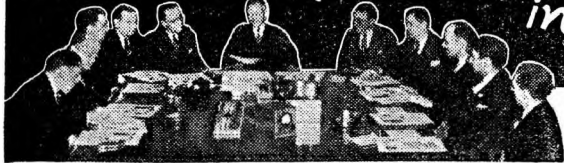
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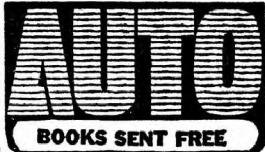
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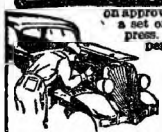
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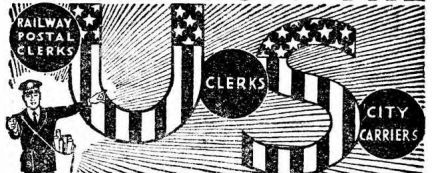
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Usually the disease starts between the toes. Little watery blisters form, and the skin cracks and peels. After a while, the itching becomes intense, and you feel as though you would like to scratch off all the skin.

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Get rid of this disease as quickly as possible, because it is very contagious, and it may go to your hands or even to the under arm or crotch of the legs.

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The germ that causes the disease is known as Tinea Trichophyton. It buries itself deep in the tissues of the skin and is very hard to kill. A test made shows it takes 20 minutes of boiling to kill the germ; so you can see why the ordinary remedies are unsuccessful.

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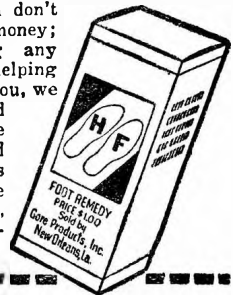
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DEATH RIDES

CHAPTER I

"You!"

BANNING listened intently. A hush-saturated atmosphere pervaded the house for a moment, in the unexpected lull of the storm. His thin face, ravaged by illness, still had a taunting grin; the white hair gleamed like an unholy halo; the small, bright eyes burned with an ancient evil as the thin-lipped mouth quirked in his mocking smile.

"Miss White?" he called, softly, sitting up in bed; but there was no answer. The trained nurse was supposed to be in the next room, alert to his wishes. He had, surreptitiously, slipped one of his own sleeping powders into her drinking water. She did not answer. So much the better, he thought; no one would hear him or follow him. Beyond the nurse's room was his young wife's apartment.

The wise, mocking eyes leered at the thought. She wouldn't mind if his midnight excursion resulted in his death! She would find consolation at the hands of some younger

A Complete Novel of Eerie Mystery



Gun drawn. Bruce King lurches into the room.

Victims Writhe in Nameless Terror as a

the **STORM**

By
**S. GORDON
GURWIT**

Author of "Out of the Coral Seas,"
"A Deal in Dragons," etc.



Mrs. Claire Banning lay on her bed, stabbed.

Bloody Corpse Pulls the Strings of Doom!

man, no doubt; but he would fool them all! A pack of harpies, waiting, like buzzards, for his death, so they could feast! A house full of relatives—his wife, his son, his niece, his nephew, all—all crooked as hell! Jailbirds—if they all got their just desserts! And some of them fit candidates for the electric chair! This idea caused him to chuckle suddenly.

"Miss White?" he called again, experimentally; but there was no answer from the black oblong of the open door. Good! The sleeping powder he'd given her had worked!

He slipped out of bed and donned slippers, a robe; he stood listening, intently. The storm would help. The great house seemed to be cowering in bewilderment before each malevolent onslaught of the furious elements; the trees outside, dropping their customary friendly rôle, became demoniacal, beating clawlike branches against the walls, ripping and tearing at them.

A ghastly tongue of serrated flame seared the heavens, and then the overpowering roll of thunder muttered down the vast corridors and arches above, like hoarse, gargantuan chuckling.

Banning shivered, the same fixed smile of unholy glee on his lips. It had always been like this when death came to Banning Hall. It would always be like this, the very elements disturbed, until the last Banning lay cold in death.

The rumbling thunder faded into the distance, a whispering, ghostly sigh, leaving the tomblike silence to re-echo down the gloomy corridors of the huge house. Then, the erratic, rolling drumbeat of the rain on the roof, the frightened clatter of a loose shutter somewhere, instead of breaking the silence, only served, by contrast, to emphasize it.

His footsteps muffled in the thick carpet, Banning crept from his room and made his silent way past the doors that housed his guests, gathered to celebrate his 70th birthday. Guests! he thought, bitterly. Enemies, in the guise of friends! How could they sleep through this storm? One of them, at least, was a thief,

and he knew it. But which one? Or was there more than one? He didn't know. Whoever it was, he was too slick to catch. Of course, he'd been laid up, too, Banning realized.

His heart pounded loudly and veins in his temples seemed to be taut with agony; sweat was cold on his forehead. What had the doctor said? No movement, no business hours, if he didn't want his heart to suddenly give way. The fool! As if he, Banning, didn't know that his days were numbered!

But he must live long enough to carry through his ideas—to once more examine the treasures he'd spent a life-time collecting.

There was a sinister effluvium in the house tonight, like some miasma that clutched foully at his lungs. He grinned hideously. Death! But first, he must do certain things. If he died—he would strike from the grave! The thought tickled his macabre fancy. His gaunt grin was like a death's head.

HIS jewel collection was in a secret vault in the private chapel he'd built. No one knew where they were—hold on! *Someone did!* He'd nearly forgotten. Several of the famous unset diamonds he'd collected from all parts of the world had disappeared. Who, he wondered, had found the secret vault? His son? Bill was always in debt, like his mother, Banning's former wife. He grinned, evilly. Dead! Damn her!

Bill, perhaps, had followed him, unseen; Bill, who had an army of collectors at his heels constantly. Or his nephew? His niece? They needed money, and few other people ever came to Banning Hall. His wife? Henderson, his attorney? One of them had guessed the secret hiding place and robbed him of a fortune. But he'd fix that before he died—yes, he'd certainly fix that!

They'd all forgotten, during his illness and incapacitation, his bed-ridden months, who he was! They'd forgot that Marshall Banning had a brain—as witness the huge munitions plant that bore his name, in Connecticut; the plant that had

made him his many millions; the plant that had been built by his inventive genius in designing the tools of war that dealt death.

Yes, his genius—and Tom Palmer's, of course, his former partner. He chuckled ghoulishly. Tom was dead, too. His daughter, Doris, was asleep upstairs. Not a bad little thing, but stupid. What would she say if she knew that her father—

Well, no use thinking about that now. He had the business and his former partner's daughter considered herself lucky to get the monthly income he so magnanimously allowed her. Fools! He knew how to plan, how to get what he wanted—and many other things!

The great house shivered before the sudden, increased fury of the lashing storm; creaked and groaned and seemed to crouch defensively. Banning padded down the stairs, entered the great hall and went through the big library. At the back, facing the Bay, was the big chapel, with its specially-built organ; the stage, where his young show-girl wife sometimes gave amateur theatricals.

On it now, was a dining table and twelve chairs. That was where all Banning ceremonial events were held—while the great organ played. Banning's grin was haggard, demented, as he viewed it. Some day, the family would collect here, while Henderson read his last will. He chuckled with a delighted frenzy.

Faintness and dizziness seized him, and he rested a minute, breath rasping in his throat; but he shook it off as a mounting excitement overcame the nausea. For the first time in a month, he would view his treasures. Beyond the great pipes of the organ he sped. Here he lit a wall light, illuminating the complicated mechanism of the organ. His fingers felt along the wall, and an oaken panel slid up at the touch of his hand.

Small, leather-covered, flat boxes lay in the secret vault. He opened them, one by one, a radiant fire pouring from their precious contents—jewels that seemed to be alive—

then, he stopped, heart hammering. One box was almost empty! The crook couldn't even wait until he died to rob him! Four of his great Golconda diamonds were gone: gorgeous, pear-shaped stones of the purest water. Only two of them were left in the leather case!

Banning mouthed furious curses at the theft, seating himself as a wave of faintness swept over him, beading his forehead with cold sweat. When it passed, he reached into the vault and examined the piece of paper that lay there. It was his last will and testament.

He looked it over with a devil's leer deeply hidden in his sunken eyes. The thief would find this. It was cleverly written. Hugh Henderson had written it to his dictation. Then he had himself rewritten it, changing it slightly.

GLANCING fearfully around, he removed the boxes of unset gems and stored them carefully in one of the organ pipes, arranging the boxes so they fitted. Then he closed the door of the secret vault, extinguished the light and moved like a shadow through the pitch-blackness of the house, every foot of which he knew by heart.

He climbed a small iron ladder to the top of the organ pipes. A tiny steel platform was back of the great, fan-shaped, Florentine grille that faced the chapel. In a remote corner, a box claimed his attention. For several minutes, muttering, chuckling, his sensitive fingers probed, arranged; then, like a shadow of evil, he climbed down the narrow iron ladder and shuffled across the chapel.

He climbed the front stairs, walked down the long hall, past the closed doors behind which slept his relatives. He was wheezing now with his efforts, his blood pounding madly in his temples. Faintness seized him overpoweringly; cold perspiration chilled him and there was a roaring in his ears. Was this death? He faced it, snarling impotently. No matter! Henderson had full, sealed instructions as to what to do. He

tried to call, but no sound came from his stiff lips. Death!

He must live long enough to give Henderson his last—and most important—instructions. *He must!* He dragged himself blindly into his room and sat for a few minutes writing; then he sealed the letter and addressed it to Hugh Henderson, his attorney. Henderson would see to it that his orders were carried out to the letter. He'd better!

A log burned dully in the fireplace, casting weird shadows at the far end of the room—dancing lemurs, like the phantoms out of a nightmare. Something moved in one of the dark corners and caught his glazed eyes. He whirled instantly. A shadow cast by the fire? The nurse?

"Miss White?" he rasped, faintly; but there was no answer. A roll of muttering thunder reverberated dimly in the distance. Lightning suddenly turned the boiling sky into a vivid cauldron—and he saw the shape that stood there, in the corner—something monstrous, like a huge bat! Something with an evil, inhuman face, partly concealed by a black mask!

His hackles rose and a feeble clucking died in his throat: a sudden palsy made his hands tremble uncontrollably. Who—what was it? One of the guests? Someone who had followed him to his secret vault? The thief—in his own family—who had so cleverly robbed him of his precious gems? The vivid flash died in a moment: in contrast, the room was blacker than ever, with the fire dancing low, weaving grotesque shapes that leaped and gibbered in the room.

"Help!" quavered Banning weakly, trying to rise. "Hein!" But the storm drowned his weak cries. A swift figure seemed to float across the room. Two strong hands seized Banning's throat with furious strength. Terror seized him as he struggled vainly and looked up into the face of the masked thing, misshapen by a long, water-proof rain-coat.

Another blue-green flash streaked across the sky. For one moment,

Banning saw the eyes, slitted and bleak through the mask, the hate-distorted face; and his lips formed the soundless word, "*You!*"

Then a knife flashed and was plunged into his heart once, twice, three times.

Banning's death cry quavered through the room, drowned out by the savage thunder. He slumped forward and sprawled upon the floor, face down, dead. A startling clap of thunder shook the earth and went reverberating down the vast reaches of space.

Then a ghastly silence fell again; roistering gusts of rain pelted the house. No one answered Banning's last, anguished cry. Somewhere, down in the great hall below, a clock boomed musically—once. Minutes later, footsteps sounded on the wet gravel walk and the doorbell shrilled faintly.

CHAPTER II

THE GOLCONDAS



HE thin tones of the doorbell echoed through the silent house strangely. Bruce King, special investigator attached to the attorney-general's New York office, waited, listening wearily to the monotonous beat of the rain. He was soaked to the skin. Shrimp, his little wirehaired fox terrier—a constant companion—shook the water from his thick coat and sat down, licking his chops and looking up at his master.

Presently, King heard footsteps within. Someone came to the door, and he heard the rattle of a bolt. The door was opened by an elderly man in a bathrobe, who peered out at him fearfully.

"I'm sorry," said King, pleasantly, "to wake you people at this unearthly hour. But the fact is, my car's stalled, down at the foot of the hill—in the mud—plus water-soaked ignition. This is Banning Hall, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir," said the man in the bathrobe.



*Snarling, he stabbed
Banning three times*

"I'm Bruce King, and I have some business to talk over with Mr. Banning," went on King. "I started from New York early enough, but the storm held me up. I've been hours fighting the mud. Couldn't do it, so I had to walk the remaining distance here on foot. Can you put me up for the night—anywhere—and I can see Mr. Banning in the morning?"

"Come in, sir." The door was opened wider and King entered the big hall, quiet and dusty, reflecting a dull glow from the fireplace in the immense living room to one side. With the door closed, the sound of the wind died down, souging mournfully outside.

"What is it, Stevens?" queried a voice from the stairs; and the man who had admitted King, evidently the butler, turned and answered:

"Why—ah—it's a gentleman to see Mr. Banning, sir, on business. A Mr. King."

"At this time of night?" asked the voice; and King saw a tall man, with a hard firmness about his upright body, come down the stairs. He had a handsome, clear, ruddy face, sparse brown hair and a clipped mustache. He was in a blue dressing gown, his pajamas showing below, his feet in red slippers.

"This is a curious hour to call on business," he added peering at King intently; then, suddenly, he nodded. "I remember you now, Mr. King. Saw your picture in the paper, and read about you—that electrical murder case?" His sharp eyes rested upon King thoughtfully. "Though I can't imagine what business you can have with Mr. Banning. I don't think he'll see you."

"Why not?" asked King shortly.

"Banning's been very ill—confined to his bed. I'm afraid he can't see anyone on business—doctor's orders. I'm his attorney—Hugh Henderson. Perhaps you can tell me what it is you want."

"I see," said King. "His attorney? Well, perhaps, if we can talk a moment, alone. I would have been here hours ago, but my car's stalled at the bottom of the hill, in the mud; and

that little bridge is about washed out. Even if I could have started, I doubt if the bridge would hold the car." He gave the facts briefly, and Henderson watched him with sharp eyes.

"Come in, to the fire," he invited abruptly. "You're soaking wet. Stevens, while you're up, bring some whiskey and soda, and see if you can rustle up some hot coffee, will you? Is the pup yours, Mr. King?"

KING glanced at the widely grinning Shrimp, and nodded. "My pal," he explained. "Perhaps you can put us both up until morning?"

"We can manage to find room, I imagine," smiled Henderson, "in this huge house. This is hardly a night to turn even a dog out. What a night! What's it all about? What brings a famous detective to Banning Hall on a night like this?" He led the way to a fireside divan, poked the logs, stirring them to greater warmth. He turned to King with inquiry in his direct gaze. Stevens had left, and the two men were alone.

Henderson was frankly puzzled by the arresting figure before him. Even in his soaked and now misshapen suit, Bruce King was an unusual personality. His face was stern and chiseled finely; the brilliant, deep-set grey eyes burned under heavy, black brows that slashed across his face like a storm cloud. The wide mouth was thin lipped and hard set. It was not a handsome face, but it was one alert with power, illuminated by an abnormal intelligence. He smiled thinly now and turned to the silent Henderson.

"You say that Mr. Banning is confined to his bed?" King began.

"For several weeks now," nodded Henderson. "Heart. I came out here to attend to some of his business—" He frowned thoughtfully. "I'm also to be here on his seventieth birthday. All his relatives are here for the celebration—upstairs, asleep." He shrugged. "I doubt if it would be wise to try to see him in his present physical condition, on business. May I ask what this business is?"

King's sharp eyes stabbed swiftly at the lawyer's countenance. "I'll tell you," he said, making up his mind. "Mr. Banning is one of the best known precious jewel collectors in this country, isn't he, Mr. Henderson?"

Henderson's eyes opened wider, contracted. He said: "I believe so. Banning has collected gems for many years and has one of the finest collections in the world, I understand. I've never seen it. But—what about it?"

"It seems that he was not always very careful where he bought his gems," said King. "Recently, two large Golconda diamonds—pear-shaped stones—were offered on the market by a suspected fence. These two are part of six that were stolen from the National Museum. Their total value is said to be close to a quarter of a million dollars. They were stolen in Washington, and disappeared from sight until the fence offered two of them for sale. There's \$10,000 reward out for them."

Henderson leaned forward, interested. "Yes?" he suggested softly.

STEVENS returned with bottles and a pot of coffee and asked: "Will there be anything else, sir?"

Henderson waved him away. "That's all, Stevens.

"But get one of the guest rooms ready for Mr. King—the room next to mine, if it's available. He's staying with us until morning."

Both men listened to the butler's soft tread as he walked away. A wind-filled silence closed down on them; the rain drummed harder than ever. Shrimp lay at his master's feet, ears cocked, head to one side, stiff hair bristling, a low growl in his throat. King shot him a glance and said: "Quiet, Shrimp!" The dog looked up, his tail wagged momentarily, then his eyes fastened again on the doorway to the hall.

King continued: "Diamonds like that are difficult to sell. Buyers are few and far between. Naturally, when two of them were offered to a well known jeweler, he reported it. He recognized them. Their descrip-

tion has been flashed all over the civilized world. We caught the fence—chap named Bogardus.

"Under questioning, he remembered that the man who sold them to him drove a car. The first part of the license number, which he remembered, seems to indicate that they were issued in Cedarcrest, Long Island. That led me here, naturally, the inference being—" King shrugged and took a long drink.

"I see," mused Henderson thoughtfully. "The inference is—what?"

"That Mr. Banning lives here; that he may have bought them from the thief, not caring where they came from as long as he could get his hands on such gems. He may have decided that they were too hot, and tried to sell them—"

"You don't suppose he'd tell you, if he knows anything about them, do you?" asked Henderson, smiling faintly. "These collectors are fanatics, King, and Banning is hardly the man to—" He paused, frowning, gnawing at his mustache with his lower teeth.

"I'll be quite frank with you," he went on, presently. "You've come at a hell of a time to do you any good. I doubt if the doctor will allow you to see him—he is forbidden to leave his bed. And—he is on the point of changing his will. That's another reason I am here. He changes his will every few months! Suspects his wife, his son, his niece and nephew of intriguing schemes—" Henderson broke off, worry wrinkling his brow. "By the way—where are those diamonds now?"

"We have the two that were offered for sale. Took them from the fence."

"Yes?" encouraged King softly.

"Banning and his wife are at dagger points. His son, Bill, is out of his father's graces; his niece and nephew—" He rumbled his thin hair nervously. "It's a house of hatreds, King, of cross purposes—of undercurrents—and now you bring this thing here! Better go back to town and forget it for the time being. You won't get far now. Everybody here suspects everybody else of undermin-

ing him or her in the graces of the old man; and Banning is pretty wise. He plays them, one against the other, using his favor as a bait."

Abruptly, a terrible scream knifed through the eerie silence of the great house, followed by another, long drawn out, breath-taking in its sheer terror. King came to his feet, eyes alert; the dog stiffened and growled savagely. Henderson also arose, pale but collected, his eyes seeking King's.

Then, before they could move, frantic feet sounded on the stairs. Into the room ran a woman in a nurse's uniform, her eyes wide with horror, her hair in disorder, her clothes awry.

"Mr. Banning!" she cried frantically to Henderson. "Mr. Banning—he's been murdered!"

CHAPTER III

THE NURSE'S STORY



ENDERSON turned without a word and rushed for the stairs, followed by King. Shrimp kept at his master's heels. Henderson ran down the long hall on the second floor, toward an oblong of light that fell in the hall. In the doorway, he paused a moment and said something under his breath which King didn't catch.

As Henderson walked into the room, King followed. His eyes darted around the luxuriously appointed room, then fastened upon the huddled figure of the dead Banning, weltering in a pool of blood. Even in death, he was a personality, huddled in the grotesque throes of a horrible and violent end. The drawn face was still one of great power.

King pushed past Henderson. "Look out!" he snapped. "Don't touch him!"

"Hell!" muttered Henderson softly. "Someone got him—at last!"

King knelt at the slain man's side, swift eyes appraising every detail. He heard doors opening along the hall, frightened voices, questions. A young man burst into the room, clad in pajamas and a dressing gown, his

thick, taffy-colored hair in limp disorder.

"Bill Banning!" muttered Henderson. "Oh, Lord!"

King watched the young man, who was about twenty-five, advance, his eyes riveted to the corpse; then he looked at King blankly, at Henderson.

"He's—dead?" he asked thickly.

"Been dead a few minutes," answered King. "The body's still warm."

A quick scurry of pattering footsteps came down the dark hallway and a magnificent blonde, in an elaborate satin Chinese kimono, aflash with gold dragons, came into the room.

"I—heard a scream!" she whispered; then her eyes fell upon the gruesome corpse on the floor. She stifled a half-scream with the back of her hand and sat down abruptly in a large chair. "He's dead!" she breathed, and covered her face with her hands, moaning softly.

"Who is she?" asked King, of Henderson.

"Mrs. Banning," muttered the latter.

King rose and eyed both the son and the wife. Another young man and two girls stood at the door, eyes wide with silent horror. Behind them he saw Stevens, the butler, and several others whom he took to be servants.

Henderson uttered an exclamation and stalked to the desk. An oblong of white caught his eyes. He picked it up. It was an envelope addressed to him and marked "personal." His eyes went to King's.

"This seems to be addressed to me," he said briefly. He tore open the envelope and read through the letter hurriedly. Then he hastily folded it again and faced King. "His last wishes," he muttered. "Seems to have had an idea—a presentiment—that he was about to die. What shall we do?"

King shrugged. "Phone the police. Cedarcrest is the county seat, isn't it? Phone the sheriff's office and tell him to get here immediately. In the absence of any other authority, I'll

take charge now. This is murder. He's been stabbed three times." Henderson made no move to comply.

A blank air of impenetrable silence seemed to fall upon them; a tacit agreement of silence, unvoiced but felt. It flashed through King's mind that one of these people had killed the old man—one of them was a cold-blooded murderer!

He picked up the phone and jiggled the hook. No answer came. He tried several times, but the wire was dead.

"Line's dead," he announced, hanging up. "The storm has probably smashed down the wires. Is there any other way of getting to Cedarcrest except that road down at the bottom of the hill?"

Henderson answered: "There's another road through the back country, but it couldn't be traveled in weather like this. It would be a sea of mud."

"I suppose so," said King, grimly. "No use, then. We can't get through until morning. I'll take charge. No one leaves this house."

Mrs. Banning stirred in her seat. "May I ask what you are doing here? I don't know you." Her voice was a frightened semi-whisper.

"Tell them, Henderson," said King. Henderson explained. They all stared at him. Mrs. Banning said:

"How can anyone leave the house? Where's Miss White? She was supposed to watch him. Where is she?"

"We'll find out, Mrs. Banning," clipped King. "For your information, and all you people here, let me add this to what Mr. Henderson has said: I'm an officer of the law. You'll all do exactly as I tell you until the authorities from Cedarcrest can come here to take charge. Now, clear this room. Get some clothes on and assemble in the living room, downstairs." He whirled on Henderson. "You stay here, with me," he added.

Henderson shrugged. "What do you want me for?"

"To answer some questions. You know all about Banning's affairs. They'll all come out now, so you might as well tell me everything that might be a clue to the killer."



Bogardus had been killed

Henderson said icily: "I'll tell you whatever you want to know. But have you thought that this might have some connection with the cause of your visit here? We—may have no connection with this at all."

"Meaning?"

"If those damned diamonds *did* come from Banning's collection—if he did buy them from some illegitimate source—"

"Yes!" grimly put in King. "That's an idea we'll also go into. Let's look this room over first. I notice that window is unfastened. Where's it lead to?"

"It goes out on a small balcony."

"I'll have a look," decided King. "My suit can't be ruined any more."

He stepped out into the slashing rain. A tiny second floor balcony met his eyes. It was not within reach of any windows except those

that led into Banning's room. Thick vines and creepers ran from the ground to the roof—good enough support for an agile man to serve as an entrance to the balcony, and then into the room.

On a night like this, the marks of feet would be wiped out instantly if the killer had entered the room from without. Wet feet, too, would show on the thick carpet of Banning's room. King looked, but saw no sign of moisture. If wet tracks had been left, they might have dried by now, with the room heated by the blaze in the fireplace.

He wondered what Banning had left behind in the letter to Henderson, and decided to ask. He stepped into the room again and faced Henderson.

"Someone might have entered this room from the outside," he said. "An athletic man might have climbed by the vines and got in that way. What was in that letter, Henderson, that Banning left to you?"

Henderson cleared his throat. "You'd have to understand Banning as well as I did to get the gist of this," he explained, taking out the note. "He—asks me to take his suit for divorce against his wife to court, regardless; to make the suit a matter of record; and he states instances that he regards as concrete grounds for divorce.

"For example, there's his nephew, Mr. West. That young man you saw in the doorway a few minutes ago." He shook his head. "Of course, with Banning dead, there's no use going into that now. He wanted to cut her off without a cent. He's been suspicious of her for ten years—since he married her."

"Second marriage, naturally. She doesn't look like young Banning's mother."

"No, she's not. She was a show-girl before he married her—and he's been sorry ever since. Banning was a difficult man, King."

"What happened to his first wife—young Banning's mother?"

Henderson met King's steady gaze. "She ran away with Banning's sec-

retary, a young fellow named Brewster. No one blamed her, particularly. Three days later, they found her blood-soaked clothes in a shack some five miles away from here. Brewster had killed her and probably sunk the body in the Bay. It was never found."

"And what happened to Brewster?" queried King.

"He disappeared. Never was heard of again. Banning claimed he'd also stolen some valuable gems—both his and his wife's." Henderson walked over to a chair and sank into it wearily, passed his fingers nervously through his hair.

"Would you know if Banning kept anything of value in this room, and if so, is it missing?" King asked him.

HENDERSON shook his head. "He never kept anything of value here that I know of. His gem collection is in his bank vault, I understand; and he kept little money in the house. All transactions were settled by check."

"In that case," nodded King, "robbery wouldn't be the motive. What else was in that note?" he asked.

"Instructions that seem slightly unbalanced to me," said Henderson, after a moment's pause. "A request that the birthday dinner in his honor be held on time—no matter if he be living or dead—that an organist be engaged for the occasion; and, at that time, the heir—" He paused.

"It's the vaporings of a diseased mind, if you ask me, but I'll carry it out. Look here! He gives full details on how to conduct the feast—then asks me to carry out an exact schedule which will be found in certain sealed envelopes he gave me. And they are not to be opened until his heir presents me with the will! Here, read the damned thing!"

King took the note, skimmed through it, his brow lifted with perplexity at the exacting and unusual requests. "You are going to carry out these requests?" he asked.

"What else can I do? The last requests of a client are sacred—I must humor him even in death! It will do

no harm, that I can see—except impress his heirs with the fact that his dead hand hasn't entirely let go its grip on mundane things!"

King's eyes were puzzled. "Tell that nurse to come in here, will you, Henderson, and then get dressed? I'll ask her a few questions and meet you downstairs later, with the others."

Henderson walked out without another word, and presently the middle-aged nurse came in, pallid, determinedly keeping her eyes away from the spot where the corpse lay. She had herself in hand now, though her lips were still faintly tremulous. King examined her minutely in a long, awkward silence.

"I want a clean, full statement from you, nurse," said King finally. "You were with him most of the time. You discovered him dead. You had the best opportunity to kill him—"

"No, no, no!" she cried frantically, her eyes wide and terrified. "How can you believe such a thing? I didn't do it!"

"Just what do you know about this, nurse?" he asked.

"Why—nothing! I set my alarm clock for twelve, to give him his drops—but I must have fallen asleep—"

"Did the alarm wake you?" he asked, interrupting.

"I never heard it! I can't account for it—"

"Wait a minute! Where is your room? Next door? Let's have a look." He walked into the adjoining bedroom and looked around. A small alarm clock stood on a night table, next to the bed; a pitcher of water, some small boxes, in orderly array. King looked the nurse over keenly. She was inwardly quaking with fear, he decided. "Just what did you do? How long did you sleep, and what happened when you got up?" he asked. "And how could you sleep so soundly in a storm like tonight?"

"I don't know," she stammered. "I suppose I was dog tired. I'd been up with him for a week. I didn't hear a thing until I awakened suddenly, covered with perspiration for

some reason. I looked at the clock, and it was after one—late for his drops, and I rushed into Mr. Banning's room and put on the lights. I—I saw him there on the floor—in the blood—and then I ran downstairs—"

"Yes," mused King, "curious!" He picked up the clock. The alarm was set for twelve, but the alarm button was down—it couldn't ring. The alarm spring was wound tightly. "Did you put the alarm on?" he asked her.

"I think I did." She avoided his eyes.

He picked up the glass at the bedside. There was a faint sediment at the bottom of the glass. He eyed it, suddenly intent. "Did Mr. Banning have any sleeping powders at any time?" he asked.

SHE nodded. "He did—I gave him one whenever he couldn't sleep." Then her eyes grew round and terror-ridden. "You think—you think I—"

"Looks like someone slipped you a powder. We'll look into that later. Don't touch that glass or the contents of the pitcher. Who had access to your room, Miss White?"

"Why, only the family, I guess. Mrs. Banning sometimes came through here, on her way to her own apartment, just next door. Perhaps the maid, who kept the room and the linens in order."

"None of the others?"

"Well, yes. Miss Palmer was here tonight. So was Miss Banning and Mr. Henderson, Mr. West and Bill Banning. In fact, after Mr. Banning's dinner, they all came through here on their way to Mrs. Banning's apartment, where they had coffee."

"I see," King said. "What else can you tell me about it?"

"Nothing, sir! I've only been here two weeks—the first nurse became ill. I know absolutely nothing but what I've already told you."

"Did Mr. and Mrs. Banning quarrel very much?"

"I—don't know. I didn't hear anything. Whenever Mrs. Banning was in there, alone with him, she always

sent me on some errand downstairs. I guess she thought I listened, but I didn't—I never heard anything—"

"Okay!" said King, smiling faintly. "Stay in your room, Miss White."

She nodded in a frightened way, her eyes flashing to the room next door, where the sinister killing had occurred, and sat down limply in a chair.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. BANNING TALKS



King made his way downstairs, Shrimp at his heels, an uneasy whine in his throat. "Quiet, Shrimp!" admonished King, and the dog fell silent. They entered the living room where, in stages of more or less conventional undress, sat a little circle of people, silent, watchful, distrustful.

In a calm voice, King explained his connections, and wound up: "You'll all obey my orders, and if I find it necessary to arrest anyone, I'll do so. "For the time being, we are cut off from the outside world. In the morning we may get through to Cedarcrest and get the sheriff in here; but until then, I'm in command. Is that clear?" No one answered.

Henderson broke the silence. "Quite clear, Mr. King. I'm sure we'll all do everything we can to help you."

"Good!" said King shortly. "I suggest that you all retire to that room across the hall and come in here one at a time, as I call you. I'd like to ask a few questions of each of you. Mr. Banning, will you please remain here, to start with?"

The young man stalked across the room toward him as the others filed out. His eyes were bitter and inscrutable, his features drawn and haggard. He was a handsome youngster, though his mouth was slack now. His eyes went to Shrimp, flashed to King. He drew a cigarette from his robe pocket and lighted it.

King said swiftly: "I'm told you and your father were on the outs—quarreled about your debts and that he refused to help you any more?"

"Did Henderson tell you that?" Banning began, furiously. "Damn him! I'll—"

King ignored that. "Have you any idea who killed your father?" he demanded.

"No," said the young man sullenly. "I wouldn't put it past any of 'em—except Doris. I suppose Henderson told you that my father was getting ready to can that—" He paused and bit his lip savagely. "Oh, what the hell!" he began again. "It'll all come out now, anyway! My father knew his wife wasn't on the level—"

"How'd he know?" asked King. "And what are you trying to tell me?"

"Well, look at it this way: She was friendly with George West, my cousin. The old man saw her with him—plenty of times. He was no fool, King. And I caught her more than once! I told my father about it—why shouldn't I? I suppose you know that now, without a divorce, she'll get a big share of the estate? It was to her advantage that he died tonight!"

"You hate her, don't you?" asked King quietly. His keen eyes were appraising the youth before him.

"I hate 'em both!" he snarled. "They both hate me! What was to prevent either one of them from killing Dad? They had plenty to gain. My other cousin, Ann Banning, is no angel, either. She quarreled with Dad constantly because he wouldn't loan her the money to open a shop on her own.

"He told her only last night that she could waste her share of her inheritance after he was dead; that he'd leave her enough to take care of her. And tonight, he's dead! I'm not saying, of course, that Ann—" He paused, flushed and bitter. "Last night Dad said he was going to change his will."

"Oh, he did?" asked King.

"Yes, he did! Maybe somebody

felt he shouldn't change the last one!"

"Perhaps you knew that he intended to disinherit you?"

"That's a damned lie!" flared young Banning. "If Henderson says that, he's lying! He's hatching some scheme to cheat me!"

"Henderson?" queried King quietly.

Banning snapped his cigarette into the fire viciously. "Who the hell is Henderson?" he gritted savagely. "What makes that guy different? Any one of 'em would cheat me out of my rights, I guess, if it was made worth their while!"

"But who," persisted King, "would make it worth while?"

"That damned tramp showgirl who took my mother's place in this house, for one! When my mother died."

"I understand, Banning. What's all this about your debts?"

Banning was silent, frowning, his thin hands plucking at his robe. "All right!" he bit off. "Have it your own way! I *am* in hot water. I need money—I lost a wad of it on the races, and I can use some; but I'm through with that sort of stuff from now on. You don't think I'd—kill him—"

"I wouldn't know, offhand, Banning," snapped King. "Let it rest for the time being. Will you send your stepmother in to me, please?"

The boy left the room, sulky, angry; and Mrs. Banning came in, wafting a fragrant aura of expensive perfume with the swish of her silks.

"I'm sure," she stammered, at once, "that I can't help you, Mr. King—"

"What can you tell me about this that will shed any light on it?" he said softly.

Tears began to fall silently down her cheeks. King concluded that she had been a good actress during her theatrical days. "Nothing!" she moaned. "I really know—nothing! I'm stunned! I'm—"

"Tell me," he insisted.

"Well—my position here has been made a hell on earth by my step-

son." Her face was an ashen mask. "He always hated the thought of anyone taking his mother's place in this house. I can understand that, of course. And there was some scandal and mystery connected with his mother's death, you know—she ran away with Mr. Banning's secretary—and was killed for her pains!"

"You knew that? Well, I knew the secretary in those days. He hated Mr. Banning fiercely—my husband told me so. It was about ten years ago. He disappeared, and I've wondered if he—wasn't alive, after all, and came back—" She shuddered.

KING leaned forward. "Just what do you know about Brewster, Mrs. Banning?"

"I'm trying to tell you! He was last heard of in South America. Mr. Banning had a newspaper clipping that told of Brewster's death. He was killed, it said, in some revolutionary battle some place—I forgot where.

"You have the clipping? asked King sharply. "Could you get it for me?"

"It's somewhere around—I'm not sure. He had a horribly violent, a hellish temper!"

"Didn't you like him pretty well at one time, Mrs. Banning?" asked King.

"I?" she asked, startled eyes wide. "Certainly not! That's the sort of vicious gossip that Bill Banning has circulated!"

"As a matter of fact, I've been told that you threw Brewster over when you saw that Mr. Banning was interested in you and wanted to marry you."

"No!" she stormed. "How dare you say that? I won't stay another minute—"

"Please!" he interrupted, coolly. "It's wasted on me. I've also heard about you and George West." Her hand motioned desperately in negation, but he continued: "Would you be interested in knowing that Mr. Banning was going to change his will—if he had lived long enough to do so?"

That got through to her. "George

West has been nice to me," she stated, looking at him through her sooty, tear-stained eyes. "It's unfair and horrid to drag him into this. He was sorry for me!"

Unshed tears stood poised in her starry eyes.

"As for my husband changing his will—I know that he was going to. He was going to cut off Bill with little or nothing! Bill gambled away every penny he got his hands on. They had several terrible scenes—awful! Bill even threatened his father. Mr. Banning was furious about it and said that he didn't intend to leave his fortune to be wasted on horses."

"I didn't mean just that," said King, grimly. "I mean that he was going to cut *you* to a minimum! And, of course you knew that he was



prepared to get a divorce from you on the grounds necessary in this state?"

"That's a lie!" she flashed, her face bloodless, the azure eyes flashing darkly. Her fingers fumbled at her breast aimlessly. "He had no reasons—no grounds—"

"Apparently, he seemed to think he had, Mrs. Banning. Henderson was all set to begin suit; had all the papers ready, waiting for your husband's signature. If he had lived until morning, the papers would have been signed, filed, and made a matter of record. But he died to-night—"

Muffled sobs came from her throat, gasping, horrible sounds that made King squirm uncomfortably; she put one hand before her mouth as if to stifle them.

"All right, Mrs. Banning. That will be all, right now. Will you ask Mr. West to come in here, please?"

CHAPTER V

MIXED MOTIVES



AFTER Mrs. Banning left, King sat motionless, staring at the rain-slashed windows. George West came in a moment later, his good-looking face very white. The lines from nose to mouth were deeply slashed, and his big shoulders seemed to sag. He smiled to King without mirth and said: "All right! All ready for the famous third degree!" He lit a cigarette.

"Are you and Mrs. Banning in love?" snapped King abruptly.

West choked on the smoke a second, stared impudently, and shook his head, expelling the smoke from his lungs. "Hell, no! What gave you that quaint idea?"

King saw the big hands clench. West's eyes had gone as blank as a sheet of ice. He smiled pleasantly enough, but he was controlling himself with effort.

"A little bird," said King, "suggested it. What's your idea? Who do you think killed your uncle?"

He broke the silence after a moment's thought. His handsome face was pale. "Frankly, I don't know. I went to bed at about eleven and fell asleep, listening to the storm. The first I knew of anything wrong was that scream. I got up and went into the hall, saw the open door and the others making for it, so I joined them." He frowned thoughtfully. "That's all I know."

"Not much, is it?" asked King. "Nothing else to offer? Nothing to suggest as to motives? Surely, you've been thinking about it?"

West considered his fingertips carefully. He was ghastly white. His lips compressed tightly, and when he spoke, it was in a low voice.

"I've always had a feeling that my uncle had something on Henderson. Those two were thick as thieves, yet there was no real liking that I ever noticed."

"Not unusual. Henderson was his attorney for a long time. Banning

was a difficult client. They might work together and still not like one another."

"It wasn't that. It struck me that Henderson feared the old man! I suppose you know that my uncle was no white lily? If you want truth, there's no use in stalling! He was a bad lot. He drove Bill's mother to run away because he wanted to be free to marry again; and she was killed by that damned secretary, Brewster. She was my aunt, you see. Banning played hell with Claire—Mrs. Banning—since the first day he married her, and treated her like a dog.

"She was an innocent kid when she married him. I suppose she thought she was coming up in the world. She soon found out what she was up against! Once, when he cursed her, I objected, and he told me he was going to cut me out of his will. I told him to go to hell and left. That interested him. He phoned me to come and see him again."

"Yes?" supplied King, softly, eyes slitted.

"I did," continued West. "Then, he told me that I was his favorite and had more courage than any of them; that I would get the bulk of his estate; that he was going to disinherit Bill. I said that it was unfair to do that—that Bill and Mrs. Banning came first. He laughed at that. 'What!' he said. 'Leave my money to a punch-drunk gambler and a stupid showgirl?'"

"Those were his very words, King. It'll give you an idea of the sort he was—malicious as hell! I was so disgusted that I walked out on him when he began to talk about his wife's affairs."

"So?" said King, softly. "What was it that Banning had on Henderson?"

"I don't know—I simply state an impression."

"Do you think your uncle remembered you in his last will?"

"I don't know and I don't care a damn! He was a genius in many ways—but every dollar he had was blood money!"

"Interesting," commented King,

slowly. West seemed sincere and frank enough; but somewhere, there was a false note in his sincerity, King thought. "By the way, what business are you in, West?"

"I'm with a Wall Street house—customer's man. Tate & Bingham."

King nodded thoughtfully. "Ever hear of a fellow named Bogardus?" He shot the question fast, having in mind the fact that the fence had said that he could identify the man who had sold him the two diamonds.

West's jaw muscles twitched, but he did not lower his direct, stubborn eyes. "Never heard of him," he answered. "Who is he?"

"Never mind," nodded King. When the time came, he thought, he'd have Banning, West and Henderson confront the little fence, and see what the crook had to say. If he identified one—But that would have to wait a bit.

"This Doris Palmer," he went on. "Does she live here?"

WEST shrugged. "Off and on, I guess. She has an apartment in town, on West Fifty-seventh Street; but she's out here a good deal of the time. Seemed to be very fond of the old man. She's a nice kid, and that old hyena never cared about anybody but himself."

"Okay!" said King. "You're frank enough! I'll talk to you again later. Will you ask Miss Palmer to come in here, please?"

West nodded shortly and left the room, Shrimp's sharp eyes following him with interest. King found another cigarette and lit it. Motives within motives! Truly, a house of hatred, as Henderson had said.

Doris Palmer sat down opposite King with fear and a congealed horror stamped on her mutable features. She had dressed in a simple sports outfit, and King nodded in mental approval. A tea-rose sort of a girl, dainty, yet athletic; pretty as a picture. She was palpably frightened.

"You spend a good deal of time here, don't you, Miss Palmer?" he asked, attempting to put her at her ease by a casual question; but he

sensed that it had stampeded her. The slim, capable-looking hands twisted slowly. She smiled mirthlessly.

"I spend a lot of time here, Mr. King, because I like the country; and Mr. Banning is good enough to ask me—" She paused, a pulse beating strongly in her white throat.

"Did you like Mr. Banning?" he asked simply.

Her eyes became bleak, stubborn and hostile; the rosy mouth rigid. He studied her, trying to fathom her unfriendly eyes. "He was good to me," she answered faintly, and clamped her lips shut.

King nodded. "Have you any idea who killed him?" he asked.

She shook her head negatively. A sudden tangent prompted his next question: "Doris—why did you stab Mr. Banning? Was it something you found out about your father's business affairs while you were out here?" His hard grey eyes held hers ruthlessly.

"I DIDN'T do it!" she exclaimed hoarsely. "I wouldn't do a thing like that! No matter how much he deserved it—" She paused, bit her lower lip with strong, white little teeth. She had slipped and she knew it—and King knew it.

Deftly, he asked question after question. No, she had no idea who could have killed Mr. Banning. She had heard and seen nothing.

"Why did you come here so much, Doris? You hated Banning—knew he had cheated your father and swindled you out of your just inheritance."

"He did!" she breathed, tensely, in a low, stricken voice. Her eyes dilated suddenly. He knew he had started something. "He did! I came here, year after year, to find the proof—and I found it! He cheated my father out of everything!"

"If you could prove that Banning cheated your father," he snapped, "why didn't you go to the authorities? Any court of law would have upheld you, if you could really prove your statement."

"I couldn't do that!" The girl was stampeded now, flushed, eyes fever-

bright. "It would have reflected—on Bill—and I couldn't—" She covered her face with her hands and a shudder ran through her. Her hands were trembling.

King's eyes were bright with understanding. "Oh!" he said, softly. "That's the way it was, eh?" He referred to a list he held and frowned. "Well, we'll skip it for the time being. Get hold of yourself, Doris, and send Ann Banning in to me."

Ann Banning came in, looking like the poster paintings of a beautiful gypsy girl. She was dark and languorous, with black hair simply parted in the middle of her sleek head and caught in back in a round knot. She smiled easily to King and thought that he was interesting looking.

"My cousin told me," she said, "all about it. He took time out from comforting the beautiful young widow. Poor thing! It's good she has one friend on a night like this! We'll save time if I tell you that I haven't the faintest idea who killed Uncle Banning. I was fast asleep. The nurse's scream woke me. I rushed out into the hall—and there you are. The rest you know. Check?"

King smiled grimly, a reluctant admiration in his deep-set eyes. "All your statements dovetail so beautifully," he acknowledged, "they might have been rehearsed! Miss Banning, you look like a very intelligent young lady. Any suggestions?"

"Oh, thanks!" she smiled, faintly. "Not a brain cell working. I can't imagine who could want to harm the dear old man. He was my father's brother, but Dad was nothing like him, thank God! Seriously, I can't offer you any help, that I know of. I heard nothing and saw nothing. I know nothing of my uncle's affairs. I'm here because he sent for me to spend some time here and be on hand for his seventieth birthday party. I think he said he had a surprise for us all."

"Any idea what it was?"

She shrugged. "Not an inkling. Henderson may know. I suppose he wanted to tell us that he had finally decided to cut us all off with one dol-

lar in cash, and leave his money to found a home for indigent misers. It would be like him."

"Apparently," said King grimly, "all his relatives loved him."

"To know him was to love him," she answered with deep sarcasm.

He asked, curiously: "Miss Banning, what do you do for a living?"

"Work," she told him frankly. "Interior decorator. I'm from the poor side of the Banning family. Of course, Uncle has hinted, at times, that he would leave me enough money to buy a flivver; then again, I heard last night that he was going to change his will." Her eyes flashed, momentarily. "I wouldn't kill him to hurry up my inheritance, if that's what's on your mind!"

"Maybe," he said. "It was an inside job, Miss Banning."

She didn't answer him; he really didn't expect an answer. He arose and said: "Let's get back to the others."

They entered the lighted drawing room.

CHAPTER VI

DEATH STRIKES AGAIN



"SUGGEST," said King, "that you all go to your rooms and try to get a little sleep. There isn't much of the night left. I want to say that I have heard some startling things tonight, from each of you—some so startling that I may make an arrest before morning." Bluff, sheer bluff, he reflected cannily, might start something among these suspicious people.

"Please do not leave your rooms, and on no condition will anyone leave this house. In the morning we may be able to get through to Cedarcrest and get the local authorities on the job. If Mr. Henderson will give me a few more minutes of his time, the rest of you can try for a little sleep."

They filed reluctantly up the broad stairs, past the frightened knot of servants, who waited, under King's

orders. They were headed by the butler, Stevens. One by one, King questioned them, but their stories all seemed the same.

The servants' quarters were in a far wing of the house. They had all been asleep. Stevens had been awakened by King's ringing of the doorbell, for a duplicate bell sounded in his quarters. The others claimed to have been awakened by the nurse's scream.

They seemed no more and no less than the ordinary run of domestics, and King dismissed them, one by one, satisfied that the killer was not among them.

"What," asked King, gently, "did Banning have on you, Henderson, that made you fear and hate him as much as you did?" he asked the attorney when they were alone in the living room.

Henderson's face went a dead white. He stared at the detective with his mask lowered for a moment, and King saw him for what he really was—a cold, ruthless marauder, hard and selfish, steeped in the sort of legal chicanery that had made him valuable to a man like Banning, who needed a sharp lawyer for sharp practices. His glinting eyes half closed as he crushed out his cigarette with steady fingers.

"What nonsense is this, King?" he asked calmly. "I didn't hate him or fear him. He was a client, nothing more. He paid well, and I carried out his orders. I'm still going to earn the last fee by carrying out his last orders—to the letter! He had nothing on me—as you put it—in any way. Someone been telling you fairy tales?" His questioning scrutiny was crafty and sombre.

"I've heard quite a lot of funny tales tonight," King told him, "some going back as far as ten years." He watched the effect of this on the other. Henderson's face looked old and haggard, but he shrugged and a faint, maddening smile tugged at his lips.

"You wouldn't try to fool an old, experienced lawyer like me, would you, King?" he brawled mockingly.

"If you don't mind, I'll catch twenty winks before morning."

"By all means," agreed King, at once. "I'll try a little of the same." He arose and followed Henderson into the hall, up the broad stairs and down the dimly lighted hall. Shrimp followed at his heels.

Henderson paused before a door and turned to King. "That's your room, Mr. King—next to mine. Good night."

"Good night," echoed King, and entered the room designated. He closed the door softly, heard Henderson's door close and the key turn in the lock. Then silence enveloped the huge house. He walked to the window, while Shrimp sought the cheery fireplace, where a small fire burned dully.

Shrimp growled low in his chest, ears cocked, and King's eyes flicked to the sturdy little wirehair. He watched the dog rise and scamper to the floor, stand there, delicately sniffing, hackles erect.

"What is it, Shrimp?" whispered King. The dog thrust out his nose and sniffed. "Quiet!" ordered King, and stood immobile, listening. Was there a faint sound outside? Did he imagine it? Nerves? Rain drummed noisily on the ruddy windows. Somewhere in the house, a deep-toned clock spoke musically; then silence.

There *was* some movement outside! King made up his mind in a moment. "Down, Shrimp!" he ordered, snapping off the lights and carefully opening the door an inch. The dog glanced at him pleadingly, but he shook his finger. "Stay here!" he said in a whisper.

He closed the door behind him and found himself in pitch blackness. Someone had turned out the hall light! What did this mean? He felt of the big service automatic slung under his left armpit, and tiptoed down the hall. Silence, heavy with portent beat upon him; a hush that seemed fraught with evil. The short hair at the back of his neck bristled. A muffled sound came from the far end of the long, black hall. He turned and retraced his steps slowly, paused as a high-pitched scream

shattered the silence with unexpected suddenness—a feminine scream!

He ran forward toward the sound. He heard startled movement in some of the guest rooms—a hurried, muffled call. All at once, a flying figure hurtled into him with mad violence and he went down from the force of the collision.

But he hung on. The tainted reek of a sweating body came to his nostrils, and desperate arms, strong as steel, beat his head. He fastened his long fingers in the clothes of the unknown and sought a chance for a telling blow, but before he could set himself, something crashed, deafeningly, on his skull. He released his hold, suddenly faint; and he heard the soft, curious crash of his senses.

KING opened his eyes again almost immediately, it seemed to him, aware of an excruciating throbbing in his head. He sat up, and the salty taste of blood ran into his mouth. His face was wet. The hall light was on again, and Ann Banning was bending over him, shaking him.

She had a glass in her hand. Stevens was running down the hall, bare legs flapping below his bathrobe. Doors stood open and voices spoke stridently from a brilliantly lighted door—Mrs. Banning's!

"Are you hurt?" asked Ann Banning. "You've been hit on the head! You're bleeding! Hurry up—someone's killed Claire!"

"What?" he gasped, staggering to his feet.

She nodded, pale as death, pointing toward the open door. "In there—go look! Hurry, do something! You're a detective!"

King gritted his teeth savagely and ran toward the door. It opened on Mrs. Banning's drawing room. It was brilliantly illuminated, but empty. Voices came from an inner room, and he raced for it—and paused on the threshold.

Henderson was bending over Mrs. Banning, horror on his contorted face; Bill Banning clutched the foot of the bed desperately and stared with wide-open eyes; George West

stood looking at the gory horror that had been Mrs. Claire Banning, his face a rigid mask of granite hardness, his big hands clenched tightly into huge white fists. He stood motionless as a statue. Behind King stood Ann Banning and Doris Palmer, motionless, eyes riveted to the gruesome figure on the elaborate bed.

Mrs. Banning lay on her back, a knife driven through her heart, and blood soaked the dainty satin pajamas she wore. In her struggle for life, she had whipped aside all the bedding. Eyes staring in a fixed terror, blond hair rumped, her limbs contorted, her flimsy, lace-trimmed night clothes almost torn from her shapely white body, she looked like some gorgeous doll, rumped and thrown aside carelessly.

"Don't touch anything!" rasped King; and they all turned to look at him. "How long was I out?" he demanded.

It was West who finally answered; the others seemed too stunned to talk. "I heard the commotion," he said, "after the scream sounded, and I ran out. Someone turned the lights on in the hall—"

"I did, sir!" quavered Stevens from the doorway. "I heard the scream in my quarters and came running. People were in the hall, and I turned the lights on from the back switch—"

"You were on the floor, and you were bleeding—" began Henderson, to King.

"Who else was in the hall?" snapped King.

"Why—we all were, I guess," said West, slowly, looking around. "Ann went to get some water to throw on you—and we went to look—"

"Why did you look in this particular room?" asked King sharply.

"Good Lord, King!" grated Henderson. "Where else? When the lights went on, we could see that all of us were accounted for, except Claire. We went to her room and found—this! We had to break open the door!"

"And what the hell were you do-

ing in the hall?" demanded Bill Banning, whirling upon King. "After all, we have only your word that you're a detective!"

"Hold it!" warned King, thinly. "Let's not all go off the handle! I heard something in the hall and left my room to investigate. When the scream came, I made for this part of the hall and ran into a man." He looked around at the three men. "A strong man," he added; "a man who managed to clip me hard with something and knock me out for the time being."

He walked to the bed and looked at the knife, nursing the cut on his head with a handkerchief. The knife was ordinary enough, obtainable in any hardware store. His eyes flashed around the room and he stalked to the windows. They were all closed and locked from the inside. In a minute, he had checked all the windows in Mrs. Banning's suite and found them all locked and, apparently, undisturbed. A grim curve settled upon his wide lips.

"One of you women cover her up," he said. "And return to your rooms."

ANN BANNING shivered, her dark eyes on King. "If it's all the same to you, Mr. Detective, I'll get a robe and Doris and I'll go downstairs for the rest of this night—and sit there, together!"

"I think we'll all join you," said Henderson. "There'll be very little sleep for any of us tonight—after this."

Bill Banning turned away and said something under his breath to Doris Palmer, while George West sat down limply in an overstuffed chair, his eyes glazed with anguish, his fingers trembling as he sought a cigarette.

"Was Mrs. Banning in the habit of locking her door at night, does anybody know?" King asked suddenly. "Henderson says you had to break the lock."

Bill Banning looked up. "I think she did. She was afraid of living out here, in the country"—his voice was bitter—"and she always locked herself in."

"Let's" said King, "assume it was locked by her. Are there some other entrances—" He paused, eyes slitted suddenly. There was a door to Miss White's—the nurse's room, which also led to the elder Banning's room. "Where is the nurse?" he demanded suddenly. "Where's Miss White?"

CHAPTER VII MORE TROUBLE



BRUCE KING strode to the nurse's door and flung it open. It was dark in the room, but he felt along the near wall and found the light switch. Clicking it on, his glance froze on the silent figure on the bed. Miss White lay there. Her face was purple with congested blood; her tongue, blue, protruding. Angry red marks on her throat told the story.

She had been strangled to death by the killer! King heard a gasp behind him and saw that the three men had crowded to the door. Ann Banning stood, hand on her heart, behind them. Doris Palmer was absent. Horrified eyes stared at the dead nurse with incredulous amazement.

King went through the room and entered the elder Banning's apartment. The dead man still lay on the floor, stark and stiff in the garish lights that shone from the next room. King tried the hall door. It was open. He frowned. Had the murderer come this way? Through Banning's room, where death had struck once before that same night? Had the killer gone to Mrs. Banning's room by way of the nurse's room, and silenced the nurse on the way?

King returned to Mrs. Banning's room. "It's almost morning," he said brusquely. "I suggest that we all adjourn to the living room, downstairs. We'll wait for morning. Someone who knows the back roads will have to make an attempt to get through to Cedarcrest and get the local authorities in. Three people have been killed in this house tonight!" He paused, his glance rak-

ing their faces. "Which one of you knows the way and can get through to town?"

"I know the roads, I guess," said Bill Banning. "I have an old motorcycle that might get through the mud. Doesn't look like it's going to clear up any! I'll try it, if you say so."

King nodded approval. "Try it. Bring the sheriff and the coroner back with you."

The others sat in the great living room, huddled close to the replenished fire, sipping hot black coffee and glancing fearfully at every shadow.

Veiled fires burned in the detective's eyes, so he drank a cup of the coffee. "Please stay here," he said to the little huddled group. "I'm going to have a look around. Bill Banning is the only one who will leave this room until I tell you otherwise." He turned to Banning. "It will soon be dawn, and you can get going whenever you think best."

King then went back to his own room and cursed himself when he heard Shrimp's impatient whine behind the door. What a fool he had been not to take the dog with him before! He released the eager little animal and began a systematic canvas of the rooms. He completed his survey of the guests' rooms, took in the third floor, which was also furnished, and the garret, black and musty. He went back into the servants' quarters and went through that. As he left, he heard the sputter of a motorcycle.

Going to a window, he made out Bill Banning leaving the front of the big estate. Dawn hung grey and drear in the east, and the rain had subsided to a sullen, heavy fall that wept around the house mournfully.

In Mrs. Banning's room, he went through her dresser drawers and her mail, locked away in the drawers of her secretary. He found the keys in her purse. The mail yielded some enlightening data that caused him to purse his lips sardonically. Her husband had not been entirely wrong

when he accused her of having other affairs!

He held the growling dog to the knife handle that protruded from her silent heart and said: "Find, Shrimp!" And the wriggling little terrier, hair bristling at the presence of death, sniffed delicately and then raced silently around the room, puzzled by the various scents which came to his nostrils.

The dog led him through the nurse's room to her bed, hackles erect; then he sniffed his way to Banning's room, exploring the various corners. He seemed puzzled. Out through the hall he went all at once, pausing at the doors of the various guest rooms. Finally, he went down the stairs, scurried around and went to a side door that led to a terrace at one side of the house.

Those in the living room could see King and the dog nosing about, but they said nothing, their eyes re-treating from King's defensively. The dog circled, came back and headed for the library, running more swiftly now. He entered the open door of the magnificent chapel, made his way across it, entered a door at the end that led King behind the organ. Here the dog whined and looked around.

"Find, Shrimp!" ordered King, but the dog nosed about to no purpose. King examined the surroundings. It was a bare space, a passageway, behind the great organ. The intricate mechanism was partly exposed here. He shrugged. A ladder ran up to the garret, and he explored that without finding anything.

As the gloomy dawn lighted the east faintly, he went back to the house. There wasn't a soul in the living room where he had left all the guests with instructions not to leave. It was deserted. A quick anger surged in him.

HE raised his voice and called sharply: "Where is everybody?"

There was no answer for a long minute; then Henderson's voice came from the stairs: "I came up here,

King, looking for some cigarettes. We ran out."

"Where are the others?" barked King. "Or did you all run out of cigarettes? I recall asking you all to please stay in the living room." He raced up the stairs, Shrimp at his heels. They had seen him leave the house, he thought. What had they gone to look for, in his absence? He ran to Mrs. Banning's room and went through the door. Sardonic mirth gleamed in his deep-set eyes.

Someone had broken open two of the small drawers in the secretary with a scissors. The scissors had broken and the contents of the drawers were scattered on the desk. He nodded slowly and went out into the hall again.

Doris Palmer came from her room drawing on a silk coat. "I was cold," she complained in explanation, "so I came up for a coat."

George West strolled out into the hall from his room and said: "Sorry to disobey orders, but I had a yen to smoke my pipe." He exhibited it.

Ann Banning came from her room and smiled cryptically to King. "Well?" he asked her grimly. "What's your alibi?"

She raised her eyebrows. "It's just none of your business, kind sir," she grinned, impudently.

"Someone," said King softly, "was in Mrs. Banning's room just now and broke open two drawers in her secretary. None of you would know anything about that, would you?"

There was no answer until Henderson said: "Oh, come now, King! After all, we're all grown-ups, and we're not running away! Under the circumstances, we're all too nervous to stay in one place. What possible harm—"

"No harm," said King. "Certain evidence in Mrs. Banning's room was sought by one of you. Someone figured on destroying it, I guess, but I beat you to it—I've got it!"

There was a muffled exclamation from George West. Doris Palmer swayed and collapsed, but West saw her topple and managed to scoop her up before she reached the floor.

"Nerves," declared King. "Carry her downstairs and we'll see what we can do for her. If you have any smelling salts, Miss Banning, bring them along, please."

BILL BANNING came back from Cedarcrest around noon, and with him the sheriff, a deputy and the local doctor, who also acted as the coroner. King identified himself to the sheriff and went over the case with him. He was a keen-eyed man named Lowden who, for all his placid appearance, had shrewd, twinkling eyes that didn't stay put a moment. He agreed to help King make an extensive search of the house and grounds.

Nothing new developed during the search, except the fact that when it stopped raining for a few minutes, King traced the telephone wires and found that they had been cut. The sheriff eyed the silent King.

"That makes it look different, doesn't it?" he offered.

King nodded. "It adds premeditation. Someone deliberately set out to do a little private exterminating, Sheriff!"

The search was continued for hours, but nothing developed. The killer had left no trace. Lowden questioned everyone in the house, the servants, the guests, Bill Banning; but there wasn't a shred of actual evidence to point to any one of them. After a formal examination, they would all have to be released.

For the next two days, King established himself in the Town Hall courtroom where the official inquest of the three murders was held. Before a coroner's jury, the occupants of Banning Hall and all the servants were put through rigid examinations. But their individual testimony did not differ in any important respect from the information that King had already obtained from them.

Whoever was behind the ruthless killings, Bruce King realized, was by all odds a devilishly clever person, who left no clues. Person? What evidence was there that two or even

more were not involved in the crimes? In such an unhappy household, who could say that the more hardy of the lot had not banded together in a vengeful conspiracy?

His mind seething with theories in its effort to piece together this gruesome puzzle, King was returning to Banning Hall the concluding evening of the inquest, which had developed nothing, when he was summoned to the phone.

The call was from the attorney-general's New York office. "Bogardus was found dead at his office this morning," he was informed by Joe Murphy, a brother sleuth. "The medical examiner places the killing—yeah, the guy was stabbed through the heart—at about one this morning. Just thought I'd let you know. We couldn't find any clues."

"Thanks, Joe," King said slowly, and hung up. Hell, this was a rotten break! Bogardus might have identified the thief who brought him Banning's two Golconda diamonds—That was it! Someone from Banning Hall could have knifed the fence last night! Everyone had turned in early and King himself was asleep half an hour before midnight. Simple matter for the killer to sneak out from the grounds, drive to New York, stab the fence and return long before the household woke up! The killer was very probably at Banning Hall right now, King told himself angrily.

Meanwhile, he and Henderson had gone over every panel in Banning's room, hoping to find a concealed safe housing his famous jewel collection. It had been rumored for years that such a hiding place existed, but Banning had always replied with an enigmatic smile to the sly hints. Somewhere was a million dollars' worth of diamonds!

There was an hour to kill between the New York phone call and the seventieth birthday dinner which Banning had so scrupulously ordered. King took a walk around the vast estate, wanting to be alone with his thoughts. He wondered about the contents of the will,

which Henderson had said he would read at the dinner, along with several notes of instruction Banning had left.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DINNER



ON HIS return, Henderson met him at the door with a grave face. "Come in," he invited. "We will have the birthday dinner served in a few minutes. Would you be surprised to learn that Bill was pretty nearly killed this evening?"

"How?" asked King, shortly. Shrimp stood off and looked at him inquiringly, scenting trouble.

Henderson's somber eyes strayed to the far hills. "He was shot at," he said. "We were all in the house—in our rooms. Bill was out near the garage, alone. He says he didn't hear a sound, but a bullet creased his shoulder."

"Silenced gun?" said King softly. "Who owns one around here?"

"That's what I thought," agreed Henderson, "but there isn't a gun on the place. West opened his baggage to me—he had none; the two girls had no guns—and I never owned one in my life. I went through the servants' quarters and searched every room. No gun. The bullet went into the garage door. I dug it out. Here it is."

King took it and examined it. A .38 from a regulation automatic pistol. "I see," he said. "How is Bill?"

"Oh, he's all right; it barely scratched him. We put a dressing on and he's as good as new. But our killer, Mr. Detective, is still with us!"

"So I concluded," answered King cryptically. "That's why I came. I have a few ideas on the subject now, and I think I can promise you that we'll have him—tonight! My assistant will identify him—I hope!"

"Who is it?" demanded Henderson at once.

"I'm not quite sure—yet, but I'll answer that question tonight."

Henderson's eyes swept him

searchingly, and he shrugged. "You said something about an assistant? I didn't see anyone with you."

"A sort of invisible assistant," said King gravely. "However, go ahead with the party—you've got me interested."

"Seven-thirty sharp is the time. A few more minutes."

Bill Banning came downstairs and called: "H'yah! If you don't catch me this damned sniper, sleuth, I'm going into the detective business myself and get him!"

"Does it hurt, Bill?" asked Doris.

"Naw!" scoffed Bill. "Just a scratch—but that wasn't what the bird intended! I'm not passing it up—" His eyes contracted slightly. He turned to Henderson: "What is this hokum we've got to go through?" he demanded.

"You'll soon know," murmured Henderson.

Stevens, ashen-faced, troubled came and whispered something to him, and Henderson nodded. He turned to them all. "All right, ladies and gentlemen—dinner is served! *In the chapel!*"

"Chapel?" objected Ann Banning; and Doris Palmer bit her lip suddenly. West paled and Bill Banning began, "For the love of—!" and failed.

"The chapel," repeated Henderson, stubbornly. "Those are the orders. A birthday party for a dead man!"

They crowded together, talking excitedly, and King, unobserved, released Shrimp and led him behind the chapel. Finding an unfastened window, he boosted the dog within and said: "Find, Shrimp!—and no noise!" The terrier panted ecstatically, wagging his tail; then King closed the window and strolled over to join the others unobtrusively. Henderson had conquered. The dinner party would be held in the chapel.

King's eyes bulged as he stood at the front entrance of the brightly lighted chapel. A table was set on the little raised stage to one side, white and glittering with silver and linen. But what chained his eyes were the chairs. They were replicas

of the lethal electric chairs used in prisons for executions!

He stared, nonplused, unable to assimilate this macabre whim of an unhinged reason. And on each guests' plate was a black helmet of the death house variety, made of paper!

Lyric protest burst from both girls; West suddenly stopped and stared, his lips moving with soundless words. Banning was incoherent with profane protest, but Henderson held up his hand. They gradually subsided.

"It was the last request," he said, somberly, "of a man who was accustomed to having his wishes carried out. I am forced to tell you that unless you humor his last wishes—you are automatically to be disinherited!" His voice shook.

"What harm can it do?" he went on. "Let's humor Mr. Banning's last wishes! I assure you that I had plenty of trouble to have these things clapped together on time and shipped here. This table is set in the exact manner Mr. Banning specified. The dinner will be of his choosing."

Something awed the little group. King saw sudden terror and fear in more than one pair of eyes. The personality of Marshall Banning was reaching up from the grave and laying cold, eerie fingers on the warm flesh of his heirs!

"Mr. West will sit at the head of the table," said Henderson; and when West took the place indicated, Banning looked up sharply. Henderson grinned, thinly. "That's right, Bill," he said. "Mr. West is the guest of honor tonight!"

"What's the big idea?" snapped Bill tersely.

Henderson took several sealed envelopes from his pocket and laid them at his side. "Let's all sit down and I'll tell you," he answered.

As they seated themselves, King saw a young man come into the chapel and go to the console of the great organ.

"Music with the meal?" he asked Henderson. "A dirge?"

Henderson eyed him bleakly. "Mr. Banning's request," he stated, low.

"And now"—he looked around the table—"you will notice that there is still one place vacant. Mr. King, not being a member of the family, or having any connection with it, will occupy an unadorned place, at the end. Now, if you will don the caps"—his attempted smile was ghastly—"we will go ahead."

Reluctantly, with stiff, unwilling fingers, they donned the grotesquely sinister black helmets, made with electrodes and small sponges. They looked at one another with white, strained faces. Henderson opened one of the envelopes.

"The first point of explanation," he said, "is the selection of Mr. West as the guest of honor. According to Mr. Banning's instructions to me, his—*heir* would bring me his latest will and would occupy the place of honor at this dinner. Mr. West brought me Mr. Banning's will two days ago!"

BLOOD rushed to Bill Banning's face and flecked it with passion; a murmur ran around the table. "What is this?" demanded Banning angrily. "What d'ya mean—his heir? *I'm* his heir! *I'm* his son—"

"Of course!" agreed Henderson. "One of them! George West inherits the bulk of the estate! Please let me go on. There are many conditions—this is not the end. Stevens!" He turned and signaled the old butler, who stood at the door, eyes frightened. "Tell the men to serve!"

King's eyes snapped to West, veiled lights in their smoke-grey depths. He half rose to speak, but changed his mind. Ann Banning saw the gesture and looked inquiringly at him; but he shook his head slightly and smiled to her. Sharp! he thought. She was as sharp as a ranier. And observant.

Bill Banning was blazing with suppressed wrath, casting murderous glances at West, who eyed them all alternately with a slightly puzzled smile and a bewildered frown on his handsome features. Doris Palmer's eyes glistened like green glacier ice, and she was grasping Bill's sleeve. Ann Banning sat now in stunned as-

tonishment, for once bereft of her usual cloak of impervious sophistication.

Two men had entered the chapel, clad in somber blue to simulate prison guards, bearing the first course. They placed the dishes before the dismayed and silent guests, and retired. King's sardonic grin deepened as he viewed the perspiration-beaded brows, the pallid, uneasy faces. Even old Banning, with his diseased intellect, his flair for mad eccentricity, had outdone himself, he thought, in this ceremonial dinner, and had stepped outside the bounds of sanity. No one ate.

Bill Banning, taut-faced, suddenly rose. "Damn it!" he shouted. "I won't go through with this spooky business—"

"Sit down!" snapped Henderson. "If you don't like it and leave—you forfeit all claims to your father's estate! Instructions—in black and white, Bill!"

"But—damn it! It's like a nightmare! It's—"

"It was your father's last wish!" the attorney admonished him.

Bill, deflated, grumbling, sat down. Henderson took out one of his letters of instruction, tore it open and read. He turned to them.

"After the first course," he said, "I am to call upon the heir of the Banning fortune for a few words. As we don't seem to be in the mood to eat, I'll ask Mr. West to rise. Mr. Banning's request, Mr. West," he added, "that you express yourself on the subject. Ladies and gentlemen—Mr. West!"

George West rose with a frozen smile on his lips and looked around with absent, unseeing eyes, as if gazing upon some obscure inner vision. He seemed like a man in a trance. Henderson signaled the organist and nodded.

The grand diapason of the organ rolled its rich music upward in a triumphant welcome to the new heir; soft treble notes took up a chant that whispered high up through the arches of the chapel, like the muttering hush of prayer, beautiful terrible in its majesty, awful in its measured

serenity, appalling, yet godlike in its calm.

It prolonged a nerve-tingling series of minor chords, like a sob—like an unearthly, ethereal *Kyrie Eleison*—and ran thunderingly to the closing base chords, gargantuan, shaking the chapel.

King rose with an incredulous light in his eyes, staring at West, a soft curse on his lips. He flicked a look toward the grand arch of the big organ. West, looking foolish, wavered slightly. His eyes bulged with a stark amazement. He plunged forward on the table, face down. Blood began to spread to one side of him, staining the white napery with its sinister crimson.

CHAPTER IX

FROM THE GRAVE



YES popping, King was out of his seat in a flash. There had been no sound, but West was undoubtedly wounded. He pulled the man back and saw that the entire front of his shirt was soaked with blood. A moment's observation disclosed the fact that West had been shot through the chest!

But how? By whom? King's keen eyes measured distances and angles and filed away the results in a corner of his brain.

Instant consternation ensued. Henderson shouted to the organist, who had arisen, dumbfounded: "Hurry—phone the police!" The organist nodded and vanished.

King forced some water between West's grimly set teeth, rubbed his head with an ice cube from one of the glasses. West opened his eyes. They focused finally upon King, with reason in their depths.

"Is it—very bad?" he whispered. And King knew what he meant. He nodded. There was no use—the bullet had pierced West's lungs and it was a matter of minutes.

"Very," he said. "If you have anything to say—say it fast! Maybe it's just as well. Old Banning was too much for you! I have an idea,

West, that you stole Banning's diamonds and killed Bogardus—otherwise he wouldn't have had you sit at the head of the table!"

"Who—who shot me?" he whispered hoarsely. His eyes flashed around at the awe-struck, horrified group. No one knew; no one answered him. King said:

"It's all over, West. Better get it off your conscience—before it's too late!"

West looked around agonizingly at the staring eyes. A convulsion jarred him; a burst of blood came to his lips. He closed his eyes.

"That old—hellhound—trapped me—somehow!" he whispered. "He had a secret vault behind the organ—I found it—secret panel. His diamonds were there. I—took one—from time to time—to get enough money—to run away—with Claire. We—loved one another. We knew he intended to divorce her—disinherit her—but we didn't care—he was a beast to her. The last time—I was about ready—took four of the Golcondas—thought he was too sick to know—sold two to Bogardus—"

"You killed Bogardus," rapped King, "so he couldn't identify you?"

WEST nodded slightly. "Had to—keep his—mouth shut—"

"Where are the other two diamonds?" asked King. Those behind him maintained a deathly silence, only their labored breathing reaching him.

"In my—room—in—town—bottom of tobacco humidior. Last time I looked in the vault—all the diamonds were gone—but his last will was there—the old man was dead—thought I'd even matters with him, for Claire. I filled in my name—as the principal heir—it was left blank at the top—for name to be filled in—the other half of estate—to go to all the other heirs—" He gasped painfully, shuddering. "I—filled in my—name—gave will to Henderson—" Bright blood spurted from the gaping wound. West slumped and wheezed hoarsely.

"Did you kill your uncle?" asked King.

"No!" breathed West faintly. "No—no—no—"

"Did you stab Claire—or kill the nurse?" asked Henderson suddenly.

"No—God! No! I—loved—Claire—"

"Did you shoot at Bill Banning today?" persisted Henderson.

"No! I—did—not! I—I—" He gasped, shuddered violently and collapsed inertly, and King straightened up and looked around at the horror-blinded faces around him.

"Dead!" he said, softly; and into his mind flashed the thought that old Banning, dead and cold in his grave, was revenged upon the thief who had taken his precious gems. Henderson shoved a long paper into King's hands.

"Here's the will!" he said thickly. "West brought it to me. You see? It is made out to give one-half the estate to the principal heir, and the rest to be equally divided among the remaining heirs. When West found this, he took it to be the last will of the old man's. All he had to do was to fill in his name at the top—see? And turn it over to me!"

His eyes ranged the chapel wildly. "But—who shot West? And—if he was telling the truth—who killed Banning, his wife and the nurse?"

Tense silence reigned for a heart-beat; then Henderson's startling question was answered by excited barking and snarling that sounded suddenly from behind the huge organ pipes. *Shrimp!* King whirled and raced for the door that led behind the organ. He went around a passage at the end of the chapel and through an open door.

Even in the gloom, King recognized the place with a sense of shock—he was behind the organ pipes where Shrimp had led him once before! Now, thinking of the angle of the bullet that had killed West, a lambent fire grew in his hard eyes.

Shrimp was barking furiously, growling savagely, when King came upon the tiny terrier. He was snapping ineffectually at the legs of a dim figure that kicked at him viciously. A gun boomed in the un-

known's hands and Shrimp yelped. The figure whirled upon King and two red stabs of flame darted toward him. He went to the floor, his own service gun out, and fired twice at the unknown.

He heard the unknown gasp and then take to the ladder that ran up to the garret, Shrimp leaping and barking furiously again, his long fangs bared; but the slim iron ladder stopped him. The man was going swiftly up when King leveled his gun and snarled:

"Stop! Back down or I'll let you have it!"

The other did not stop, but raced upward and had nearly gained the top when King squeezed the trigger. At the shot, the other jerked, straightened, bent backward in an agonized curve. Slowly his fingers released his gun. It clattered down. The body of the unknown sagged, wilted and dropped, wedging himself between two of the huge organ pipes. Whoever he was, he lay still; and blood began to drop, faster and faster, into an ever-widening pool.

Henderson and Banning had followed and now stood looking up with gaping mouths. "There's your killer!" snapped King. "And, unless I'm very much mistaken—you'll all know him! I'll go up and release him—you help me get him down."

He climbed the little iron ladder and began to draw the limp body out of the crevice between the two pipes. He suddenly noticed a black box at the end of the platform, and grunted. He stopped a moment to examine it, an exclamation coming involuntarily to his lips. "I'll be utterly double-damned!" he muttered. "Well, it had to be—to fit the puzzle! First, we'll look this bird over—then we'll have a look at that box!"

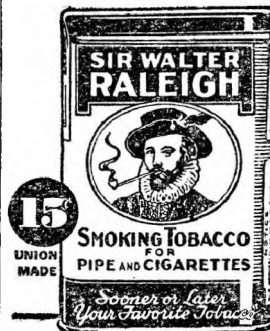
When the body of the unconscious unknown had been handed down, King noticed that the falling body had dislodged what seemed to be a panel in one of the big organ pipes. Inside, under the rays of his flashlight, he saw black, flat boxes piled, one on the other. He opened one and

LO—THE POOR INDIAN!



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his eyes flashed. The gem collection! He closed the box and put it back with the others.

Climbing down, a deep scowl on his face, he warned Shrimp off the burden Henderson and Banning carried. They laid him on the floor of the chapel and ripped off his mask—and there was an astonished gasp from all of them in unison:

“Brewster!”

“So, that’s Brewster, is it?” asked King, bending to take in the hard-bitten face, marked by scars; the seared, ugly mouth. “Someone’s used him pretty roughly!”

“Brewster!” whispered Henderson; and Banning stared speechless—a white rage gradually growing on his pallid features, a murderous hatred. King, seeing it, cautioned him away.

“That’s out!” he said flatly. Let’s see how badly he’s hurt—and what he has to say.”

Ann Banning glanced from the man on the floor to the quiet figure sprawled over the table. “Good Heavens!” she murmured. “Two of them!”

BREWSTER opened his eyes and stared around him. Recognition flooded his eyes as he saw Henderson, Banning, Doris Palmer and Ann Banning bending over him. A sneer crossed his mutilated, ghastly face.

“So—you did get me, eh?” he sneered. “Well, I don’t care a damn—now! If it hadn’t been for that cursed dog, you’d never—”

“Don’t be so sure!” interrupted King. “I put the dog there on purpose. When I found crumbs of bread in one corner, I thought that someone was hiding in there! So, you’re the fancy little killer that stabbed Banning, his wife and the nurse—just because she happened to be awake at the wrong time! What was the idea, Brewster? Weren’t you content with running away with another man’s wife, killing her and—”

“You lie!” snarled the wounded man fiercely. “I didn’t! Banning framed me! He found the place

where she was hiding—he treated her like a dog—and *he* killed her! I was on the spot when I came back and found her, the poor devil! He got rid of her so that he could marry that Claire—then he fixed it so that I would get the blame!

“And I did! He planted her blood-stained clothes on me—planted some of his diamonds, too, in the shack where I was trying to help her get away! I had to leave the country and go to South America.” He glared at Bill Banning with suppressed hatred; the others were silent, stunned.

“And even down there,” went on Brewster, fiercely, “his cursed bullets—that he sold to each side equally!—ripped me apart; and his damned gas seared my face and my lungs! I got out of the Chaco and came back. I hid in the chapel behind the organ and watched my chances—prowling the house at night, for meals.

“Banning had done quite enough to me. It was my turn! Sure I knifed him! He had it coming! And I knifed Claire, too! She gave me the air when Banning fell for her. It was on her account that Mrs. Banning died—and she was a fine woman! I’m sorry about the nurse, but she would have screamed—”

“And you shot at me this afternoon!” cried Bill Banning, rage distorting his face; but King suddenly got hold of him.

“Steady, Banning!” he rapped. “The law will pay your score.”

“Yes, I took a crack at you!” acknowledged the wounded man, tensely. “Because I wanted to wipe your whole accursed tribe off the map! Dealers in wholesale death! Bullets and gas for friends and enemies—for a profit! Damn you—”

“But why kill West, Brewster?” demanded Henderson. “He never harmed you!”

“I didn’t! I was watching all of you from up there—your rotten little dinner—and I was hungry as hell—and I saw him crash over.

But I never harmed him! One of you shot him! I—" He suddenly collapsed like an empty sack, unconscious.

THE others turned fearful eyes to King. "Dead?" asked Henderson, stiff-lipped.

"No, merely wounded, in the thigh. He's passed out. He'll live to burn for his crimes, poor devil! He didn't shoot West, Henderson."

"Then *who did?*?" asked the bewildered attorney. "Don't tell me that there is still *another* killer around here! I'm about dead with the jitters now—"

"Marshall Banning killed West," said King, slowly. "He knew that someone was taking his precious diamonds, one by one, and he could not, apparently, catch the thief. His time was short, and he was ill and unable to get around much—so he baited his gem vault with a will!

"The thief—it could only be one of his own family, he must have figured—found the will, filled in his own name as heir, and brought the will to you, claiming he'd found it—or that the old man had entrusted it to him.

"The old man figured he'd do that—that his avarice would trap him; and this dinner was part of the old man's scheme, not only to trap the thief but to kill him as well! And he did just that!"

"How?" whispered Ann Banning.

"I'll show you," answered King. "Henderson, warn all those servants away from the table. Put another chair on top of the one that West was sitting on—and a newspaper flat against that. Then, we'll stand here to one side." He waited until his instructions had been carried out, then resumed. "Watch that paper! Miss Banning—will you play the last part of that same composition that the organist played? Please!"

She sat down at the keys, eyeing him curiously, nodding her dark head; and her fingers raced over the notes. When the last chord

sounded through the chapel, a small black hole appeared on the newspaper—at about the height of a man's chest if he were standing at the table. There had been no sound of the shot, no sign.

"Who did that?" Henderson whispered.

"That," said King, grimly, "is a tribute to the mechanical genius of Marshall Banning! A robot that functions long after the master's brain is cold in death! Up in that grille work, Banning installed a silenced automatic and cocked it for the first shot. The trigger is fastened to a wire which runs to a diaphragm.

"It vibrates to a low note on the organ—just as the little toy dogs you see in stores jump out of their kennels at the sound of your voice! The diaphragm vibrates, pulls the trigger, while the chord of organ music drowns the slight sound of the silenced shot.

"The pistol is fastened tightly so that it points to the breast of the man—the 'guest of honor'—who is standing at the head of that table. Watch! Miss Banning, please run your fingers down all the bass notes!"

They watched fearfully, hardly crediting it; but suddenly, a slight *plop-p!* sounded and another hole, scarcely an inch away from the first one, appeared on the newspaper. A gasp went up.

"Well, I'll be—!" whispered Henderson, white as chalk.

"Me, too!" gasped Ann Banning, staring.

"Being an automatic," King said, "it reloads automatically after each shot—and will, until the magazine is empty!"

"And look here, King," said Henderson, "the old man must have anticipated all this! Here's the last envelope. It's labeled: 'To be opened after the first heir dies not later than December first of this year.' *That's right now!* The first heir is dead! Here goes!" His fingers fumbled as he opened the envelope and read, the others watching him intently.

"Hm!" he said, looking up. "This is a brief will, scheduled as his last, leaving all his estate to Bill! He refers me to a former schedule, filed in my office, for taking care of his other heirs. Well! This means that Bill will get what is his—except that jewel collection which is so mysteriously missing—"

"It's in one of the pipes of the organ," said King, quietly. "I saw the boxes. Bill gets that, too—except for any more Golcondas that might be among those that are the rightful property of the National Museum!"

Two hours later, Brewster was on his way to the Cedarcrest jail, in the custody of Lowden, the sheriff. West, too, had been taken to town by the coroner. Henderson had made a complete check of the gems. Two of the Golcondas were found, and these Henderson promised to give up to the proper authorities to have their ownership decided.

Bill Banning and Doris Palmer had strayed away across the ter-

race, and King, watching them with cynical eyes, smiled slightly. After all of the elder Banning's planning and depredations, the Banning fortune and the Palmer money would again come together in a partnership—of a different kind—if the way Bill looked at Doris meant anything. And King flattered himself that he knew the signs.

Shrimp lay at his feet, ears cocked, alert. King was tired. He lit a cigarette and turned his head as a faint whiff of some exotic fragrance drifted past his nose. Ann Banning came on the terrace, looking like something out of the "Arabian Nights."

She smiled at King, and he held a match to her cigarette. She sat down near him and sighed. "Those two!" She nodded to Bill and Doris, silhouettes at the far end of the terrace. "Nice, aren't they? Swell kids! Were you ever that young, Mr. King?"

"I still am," he said, turning his grey, smoky eyes to her, a twinkle in their depths.

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PROBAK JUNIOR

Maniac House



He shone his flashlight on the corpse

*Where There's Madness There's Method, Deputy Freese
Discovers as He Seeks the Hidden Meaning of
the Strange Laughter of Dying Men!*

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

Author of "Death on Nob Hill," "Death a la Carte," etc.

"I DON'T believe in ghosts either," said Dr. Coleman, "but the man's dead. You can't argue that away. He's dead."

"Musta been a pretty hefty ghost that killed him," said Skinny Bill Freese. "Damn near busted his head open. Look."

Skinny Bill Freese, red-faced, a yard wide, and two hundred and

eighty pounds thick, was the fattest deputy sheriff south of the Tehachepi, but he moved with surprising nimbleness as he shone his flashlight down at the corpse sprawled on the steep, carpeted stairway.

The dead man was a clean-cut, sandy-haired fellow of about thirty. His forehead had been horribly crushed by something blunt and

heavy. The blood which concussion had forced from his eyes and nose had dried on the grimacing face.

Besides Freese and Dr. Coleman, who had been summoned from his bungalow in the adjoining orange grove, three other men stood staring at the corpse on the stairs of the Maynard house. There was Deputy Sheriff Henry Corson, bow-legged, sure-eyed, and quick-shooting; there was pale, slick-haired young Willis Maynard, who had inherited the Maynard house at the death of his father a year ago, but who wouldn't live in it; and there was Bisbee, the grizzled, white-mustached, one-eyed old caretaker, who lived in a cottage fifty yards from the house.

BISBEE and young Maynard remained near the open front door. Skinny Freese knew of their silly objections to entering the house at night.

"Who is this guy, anyhow?" demanded Freese, as he bent over the corpse. "That ghost of yours seems to've frisked him. He ain't got a single thing in his pockets we can identify him by."

"All I know," piped old Bisbee, "is his name is Riggs—or maybe Jiggs—and he must be from outa town, 'cause nobody around here would want to rent this house, and he did. Least, he said he did. He come here with the key he got from Jewel, the real estate agent, and even after I told him about Old Man Maynard's ghost, he wanted to see the place. He—"

"Who found the body?" Freese asked.

"I did," said Willis Maynard, running his white, graceful fingers nervously through his hair. "I came up to the house while Bisbee went for the doctor."

"What's the idea of goin' for the doctor, before you even knew what happened?" Freese demanded sharply.

"I knew what happened," Bisbee insisted shrilly. "It always happens that way—as soon as they stop laughin'—"

"Stop laughing?"

"Sure. This Jiggs—or Riggs—was laughin' like mad," said Bisbee. "He hadn't been inside the house more'n ten minutes when he started laughin' and whoopin' and yellin' like a crazy man. We could hear him clear down here. And I said to Mr. Maynard here, 'He's seen it. Yore pore dad's come back again tonight and the stranger's done for.' Then he stopped laughin' and I went for the doctor."

"The body was right here on the stairs when you found it, Mr. Maynard?" Freese asked.

"Yes," was the reply. "I saw it when I opened the door. I didn't come in. I saw at once he was dead."

Deputy Sheriff Freese pushed his stiff-brimmed Stetson to the back of his head. If Maynard had been at the front door all this time, then the murderer must be still in the house.

"Unless he used a window, or the back door," Freese said aloud. "Henry, you and me are goin' to have a look through the house."

"Don't do it, gents!" Bisbee exclaimed. "The Old Man ain't easy in his grave tonight."

The fat deputy turned his flashlight on the caretaker. The old man had a glass eye that was pale blue and didn't match the color of his good one. The glass eye wasn't in straight, and looked off at a startling angle as it glittered under the flashlight.

"Bisbee," said Freese, "you hop across the road to that real estate agent—what's his name? Jewel—and tell him to come over. Maynard, you can go with us if you want."

"I—I'd rather not," faltered Maynard.

"Tell you what," said Deputy Sheriff Freese, rubbing his three chins thoughtfully. "You say you ain't scared of ghosts, Henry?"

"Not of no ghosts I'm liable to meet tonight," grinned Corson, the bowlegged deputy, slapping his leather holster affectionately.

"Then you take a squint inside,

upstairs and down," said Freese, "while I check the doors and windows from the outside. I'll meet you at the caretaker's cottage afterward. I forgot to phone the coroner."

Skinny Freese walked around the outside of the house, examining the flower beds for footprints. You had to say that for Bisbee: he did take care of the garden. The flower beds were in good shape for a deserted place like the Maynard house—"Maniac House," as the neighbors called it after the strange events of the past year.

Maniac House was a two-story place in the midst of a little citrus grove twelve miles south of San Diego—between Chula Vista and the Mexican border, to be exact. Old Man Maynard, who built it, was a retired dentist who came to southern California from somewhere in the Middle West. When he died the year before, his son Willis came home from art school in Paris and started remodeling the house. He was going to convert part of it into a studio—but he never did.

The carpenters had been in the house only two days when Willis Maynard was found lying on the stairway one midnight, a deep gash across his forehead, laughing and babbling like a maniac. He was delirious for two days, then recovered completely. He could never explain what had happened to him, although Bisbee, the old caretaker, claimed to know because he had seen the same phenomenon himself: the ghost of Old Man Maynard walking down the halls at night, clad in a white dentist's smock, holding a candle in one hand and swinging a huge pair of forceps in the other.

Young Willis Maynard always laughed uneasily when Bisbee told this story, but he never slept in the big house after that. He went there in the day time to paint—he had set up his easels in the sitting room which had a north light—but he lived in a room in the caretaker's cottage. And he had put up the house for sale.

Even at the low price Maynard was asking, there were no buyers.

Prospects invariably shied off when they heard Bisbee's story of Old Man Maynard's murderous ghost. Then, just last month, Old Man Maynard's nephew came down from San Francisco with an idea of buying the place—for sentimental reasons, because he liked the location, and because it was cheap.

The first night he was heard laughing insanely by himself—just before he was found lying on the stairs of Maniac House—dead, with the front of his skull bashed in.

AND now this stranger Riggs! Three dead, one wounded!

"Damned funny," said Deputy Sheriff Freese to himself as he allowed his flashlight beam to crawl along the ledges of the back windows, where there might be marks in the dust.

"Any luck?" asked Dr. Coleman, who had been following the deputy's examination with close interest.

"Nope," said Freese. "By the way, Doc. You're the one that signed Old Man Maynard's death certificate, ain't you?"

"That's right."

"Is it true he died the same way as these others?"

"Hardly," said Dr. Coleman. "It's true that he was found lying on the stairs, and he did bruise his forehead in the fall. But his death—and the fall—were caused by cerebral hemorrhage. Apoplexy."

"Do you think Bisbee's crazy, Doc?" asked Freese.

"He's a little queer," the doctor replied. "Not crazy, exactly."

"You think he's sane enough to maybe figure he might lose his job if Maniac House changed hands—and that he's too old to get another job?"

"I have thought of that," said the doctor soberly.

"And maybe you thought how nice it would be to add this Maynard citrus grove onto your own grove next door—if you could get it cheap enough," said Deputy Sheriff Freese, suddenly shining his light in Dr. Coleman's face.

The doctor laughed—but his cold

grey eyes didn't as much as blink into the glare.

"Are you trying to make out that I've been playing ghost?" he asked.

The fat deputy stared at him a moment without replying. Then he snapped out his light.

"Let's go down to the caretaker's cottage," he said. "There's no prints or anything here."

Deputy Sheriff Corson evidently hadn't finished his inspection of the inside of Maniac House, as he had not yet reached the cottage. Young Maynard was there when Freese and the doctor came in, and old Bisbee had come back with Jewel, the real estate agent from across the road.

Jewel was a tall, cadaverous-looking man with buck teeth and dark, deep-set eyes. He was greatly agitated by Freese's entrance.

"Mr. Deputy Sheriff," he said in a deep, bass voice, "Bisbee tells me that prospect of mine just got himself killed. I warned him about Maniac House, too, but he just laughed. Lucky he left me his card before he—"

"Let's see it!" Freese commanded.

Jewel held out an oblong of pasteboard. It read:

JAMES L. RIGGS

*Federal Bureau of Investigation
Department of Justice*

"Hell an' pink horse-feathers!" Freese exclaimed. "A G-man! Now what the devil—"

"He said he wanted to rent a cheap place in this neighborhood," said Jewel. "Had to have it furnished, because—"

"Just a second while I make a phone call," said Freese.

He stepped into the next room, called the Federal Building in San Diego, talked for several minutes in a low voice. When he came back, the wide brim of his Stetson, tilted down over one eye, hid the puzzled frown on his ruddy brow.

"Guess you're right, Jewel," he said. "Seems like the F.B.I. loaned Riggs to the Immigration Service for a special job. Seems like there has been some smart racket goin' on

down at the Border—phony visas, or somethin'—with a lot more foreigners comin' across the Line than the books show ought to be comin'. Riggs was goin' to look into the business, and I guess he wanted this place so he could be close to his work. Now if—"

He stopped. He felt his scalp crawl, his blood turn to ice water. From somewhere in the night, somewhere in the direction of Maniac House, came a wild, inhuman laugh. It was a long, mirthless peal of laughter that was somehow not like laughter at all. It was a little like a shriek, a little like the lugubrious baying of a coyote. It did not sound at all like Henry Corson, yet it must be Corson. Maniac House! Freese, for the first time, appreciated the name. He had heard a sound like that only once before—when he had escorted an insane man to the state asylum at Patten!

THE mad laughter swelled again—then died in a long, drawn-out sob. After that, silence.

Freese's quick eyes swept the tense faces about him. Everyone bore a taut, fearful expression. The pale, esthetic brow of Willis Maynard was spangled with cold sweat. Old Bisbee's one good eye bulged with horror, a horror accentuated by the grotesque unconcern of the blue glass eye. Jewel's thin lips were drawn back from his buck teeth in a grimace of surprise and disbelief. Even Dr. Coleman's hand trembled as he tried to light a cigarette.

"It's happened again!" wailed Bisbee at last. "Your pal! I warned him! I warned you all that Old Man Maynard ain't easy in his grave tonight! I warned—"

"Come on!" Deputy Sheriff Freese whipped out his gun. "We're all goin' back to the house!" he declared. "We're goin' to clear this thing up once and for all. And if anything's happened to Hank Corson—"

"I ain't goin'!" wailed Bisbee, his teeth chattering. "I—"

With his chubby left hand Freese grabbed the old caretaker by the

scruff of the neck, lifted him clear of the floor, hurled him in the direction of the screen door.

"Don't talk back!" he said. "We are all goin'. Now git!"

Bisbee got. So did the others. They ran like scared rabbits before the gun of the aroused deputy. Skinny Freese ran after them. He didn't waddle, his great weight was no handicap to him; he ran, herding Bisbee, Maynard, Jewel and Dr. Coleman up the steps of dark, forbidding Maniac House.

At the front door Freese paused. His flashlight beam slashed the gloom of the interior, ripped up the carpeted stairway. The corpse of Riggs, the dead G-man, still lay there—but that was all. Thank God for that! Despite his skepticism of Bisbee's ghost stories, Freese half expected to find Hank Corson's body lying there beside Riggs.

"Who's got lights?" Freese then snapped.

The electricity was not turned on in Maniac House. Only Maynard and Coleman had pocket lamps.

"I—I'll go with the doctor," said Jewel, the cadaverous realtor.

"I'll stay here," whined old Bisbee. "You need somebody to guard the door—"

"You'll come with me!" Freese ordered. "Maynard, you take the left wing. Doc, you and Jewel take the right."

Freese and Bisbee went upstairs. The mad laughter they had heard a moment ago was not repeated. A thick, ominous silence seemed to flow through the dark, musty house. Only the creak of flooring and the whisper of footsteps from the searchers on the lower story, disturbed the tense stillness.

Freese and Bisbee went into all the bedrooms. The furniture, shrouded in dust-covers, loomed like deformed specters under the restless, glaring eye of the deputy's lamp. But there was no trace of Henry Corson.

Freese rubbed his three chins as he emerged into the upstairs hall. There was something funny about

that hall, but he couldn't tell what. He had noticed it before, but he was unable to analyze his impression that there was something wrong. He paced the length of the corridor, then went down the back stairs. What the hell and pink horsefeathers had happened to Corson?

"There—there's the basement," suggested old Bisbee in an unsteady treble.

So Freese tried the basement. The basement stairs were thick with dust, but the deputy went down anyhow. Corson *had* to be somewhere. Freese's light revealed a big, hot-air furnace, and a nearby pile of coal. The coal was grey with dust. Also grey with dust was Old Man Maynard's abandoned dental office equipment which was stacked in a corner of the basement. Obviously the dental chair hadn't been touched in months, and spiders had spun a web from the tall drill-standard to the instrument cabinet.

"Say, Bisbee," Freese began, when did—"

He stopped. The one-eyed caretaker was no longer beside him. He turned quickly, hurried up the basement stairs.

Just before he reached the top, he heard a loud, startled shout. Running footsteps followed, then confused exclamations.

FREESE made for the sound of excited voices. He found the four men in the dining room, in the left wing. Maynard, Jewel and Dr. Coleman were standing in front of an open window, staring in horror at something outside. Old Bisbee stood a little apart from the rest, his lips moving in silent prayer, his good eye shut tight, the ghastly, unseeing blue of his glass eye leering at Freese through half-open lids.

Freese crossed the room in a bound, elbowed the others out of his way.

Just outside the open window, lying in a clump of shrubbery, was Deputy Sheriff Henry Corson. Corson's face was wet with blood. Just above his eyes was a wide streak of crimson pulp.

In an instant Freese had straddled the sill, sprang to the side of his fellow deputy. Tenderly he gathered his bowlegged little friend in his great arms, gently stretched him on the ground.

Corson still lived. Little bubbles of bright red froth that came and went between his lips showed that he still breathed. But Skinny Freese knew that it would not be for long. He knew by the horrid snoring sounds that came from Corson's throat and the blood trickling from his ears, that his skull was crushed beneath that ugly welt on his forehead.

Dr. Coleman was crouching beside Freese now, examining the unconscious deputy with his flashlight.

"Can we move him, Doc?" Freese asked. "At the hospital—maybe—"

The doctor shook his head silently.

Freese looked down at Corson again. As he watched, the man's hands slowly turned to wax. Even before Dr. Coleman said so, he knew that Henry Corson was dead.

For a long moment Freese remained motionless by the body of his dead friend. Then he began to swear. And as he swore, his stunned grief flamed into burning, purposeful anger. It wasn't a ghost who had killed Hank Corson, but a fiend! And by all hell and pink horsefeathers, Skinny Freese would get that fiend before the night was out!

EAGERLY Freese examined Corson's body for clues. He found broad, pinkish smudges on the insides of both dead hands—some pink, powdery substance that rubbed off easily. Freese smelled it. It had the faint odor of calcimine.

Then Freese looked for Corson's gun. It was still in its holster. Damn' funny, Freese thought. Corson had been attacked from the front—that's where the wound was—yet he hadn't pulled his gun. There wasn't a man in the Southwest quicker on the draw than Hank Corson. Why hadn't he even tried to use his pistol?

Freese stood up.

"Gents," he announced to the four

men watching him in silence, "the coroner and a carload o' Federal men are on their way down here from San Diego. I figure they ought to be here in about twenty minutes. But before they get here, I'm gonna have the bracelets on the guy that killed Hank Corson, ghost or no ghost. I'm tellin' you that, gents, so that in case one of you wants to save trouble and maybe the risk of gettin' shot—"

He paused. No one spoke. He swept the four faces with his flashlight—then snapped it out.

He walked away a few steps and looked up at the dark-looming mass of Maniac House. Protruding from the sloping roof, he made out two dormer windows. Quickly he walked around to the other side of the house, looked up again. There were two more dormer windows on this side. He frowned into the darkness. Then, suddenly, he thought he knew the answer.

Freese hurried to the spot near the entrance to the estate where he and Corson had parked their car. He unlocked the door, and began rummaging in the back seat, where they kept their emergency equipment: a short shotgun for close-in work, a tommy gun with extra ammunition drums, a tank of tear gas, a little box of gas grenades, other gadgets for fighting bank robberies, quelling riots.

The deputy soon found what he was after, stuffed it under his coat—which made a big, queer-shaped bulge when he buttoned it. Then he started back for Maniac House.

He went directly to the second story. He walked through all the bedrooms again. He paced the upstairs hall. This time he knew what was wrong with the hall. It was too short. There were three rooms opening off one side of it, and only two off the other. From the outside of the house there were four dormer windows. From the inside, only three rooms had dormer windows. There must be a room sealed off, somewhere!

Freese stepped into the bedroom at the short end of the hall. He

examined the walls. They were papered with a gaudy flower pattern. Disappointing. He opened the closet door—and his heart leaped!

The closet walls were covered with pink calcimine. He ran his hand over the surface. A pinkish smudge stuck to his fingertips. The scent was hot! Hank Corson had been killed here—or near here!

Freese began working around the closet walls, pushing with his free hand. The far wall gave a little. He pushed again. The wall swung back—like a door. He stepped through the opening. The wall swung shut behind him.

His flashlight revealed that he was in a small cubicle, no larger than six feet by eight. The walls, floor, and ceiling were bare, except for a heavy-coiled spring that had forced the wall door shut after his entrance. He ran his fingers along the corners, seeking some crack by which he could open the door again. There was none. He pushed against all four walls. They were unyielding. He was trapped!

Suddenly he was aware of a faint, steady hissing sound. He listened, tried to locate the source by ear. The sound seemed to come from all directions.

HE sniffed. There was no odor of gas—only a sweet taste at the back of his tongue. There were no fumes swirling in the beam of his flashlight. Yet he felt a sudden wave of giddiness surge over him.

Again his flashlight explored the walls of his prison. This time it revealed something he had not noticed before: a small, oblong steel grille in the baseboard, like a furnace register.

He started across the room toward the oblong grille. He felt his knees weaken under him. He reeled a little. He was strangely light-headed. An uncontrollable feeling of exhilaration welled up in him, as though he were pleasantly drunk. He wanted to laugh, to shout.

Nitrous oxide! Laughing gas! He had guessed right, then—only he

had forgotten that the favorite anesthetic of dentists had no color or odor. Was he too late? The hissing sound seemed very far away.

Quickly he unbuttoned his coat, took out the object that had made it bulge. In a few seconds, he had adjusted his gas-mask over his face.

He sat down on the floor, breathed deeply. He was still conscious. Apparently he had not inhaled enough of the anesthetic to put him out. He breathed deeply through the mouth-piece of his gas-mask. In a short time he felt his head clear.

The laughing gas was still hissing through the opening in the baseboard. The deputy bent over to see how it worked. He shone his light through the steel lattice of the register, and behind he saw a cylindrical metal tank with a tapering snout, the sort of container in which the liquefied gas is sold to dentists. He also saw a storage battery, an alarm clock, and a series of levers connected with the pet-cock on the tank. Evidently an electrical contact on the door turned on the gas automatically and the clock turned it off when the proper sleeping dose had been administered.

There was a click. The hissing stopped.

Freese snapped out his light. He wouldn't have long to wait now. He drew his legs under him, raised himself to a crouching position. Then he drew his gun, and, every nerve taut, every sense alert, he remained poised, peering into the darkness.

After a few moments he heard a faint rasping sound. A dim narrow strip of grey light split the darkness in front of him.

The rasping sound was repeated. The strip of grey widened. The opposite wall was sliding back. It was sliding more rapidly now. The grey strip expanded to an oblong. Then it was blotted out by the shadow of a man.

Freese's tense muscles uncoiled. He stripped off his gas-mask, sprang toward the shadow.

His shoulder hurtled against a human body. There was a grunt. At the same moment something

heavy crashed down across the deputy's back.

Freese winced with pain, but charged on, undeterred. He grappled with his adversary, felt hard, powerful muscles move under his savage embrace. The man still had an arm free to swing his heavy bludgeon. The sledge-hammer blows continued to thwack down on Freese's shoulders and back.

Freese rushed his enemy backward. The man gave way against the deputy's superior weight, retreated through the opening into a larger room. Freese lunged. His adversary stumbled, fell.

Freese landed on top of his unknown enemy, but the man was unbelievably agile. Almost instantly his quick, wiry body wriggled free.

The deputy raised himself to one knee, leveled the barrel of his pistol at the hoarse, panting sound in the darkness. He squeezed the trigger. Jagged flame spewed from the muzzle, roaring once, twice—

Missed!

The heavy bludgeon swished down toward the flash, smashed Freese's gun hand. The gun exploded harmlessly once more, then spun out of the deputy's stunned, aching fingers. He could hear it sliding across the floor.

Freese flung himself forward, grappled with a lithe, twisting torso, went down in a clinch. He rolled over, trying to avoid the battering, mauling storm from that loaded blackjack. His fingers closed on a cold, rough, metallic bar. He hung on. His other hand contracted into a fist, belabored the back of his adversary's neck with rabbit punches.

The killer's grasp weakened, Freese pulled the metal club free, swung it. A swift fist crashed against the deputy's jaw. The bludgeon slipped from his fingers, banged against the wall.

The two men clinched again, rolled over and over across the floor. The killer tried to grind his knuckles into the deputy's eyes. Freese fought him off. The killer writhed desperately, brought his knee sharply into Freese's groin.

And suddenly Freese found himself on his back, with the killer's clawlike fingers sinking into his throat.

Freese fought desperately to tear those suffocating hands from about his neck. No use. The killer's grip was as firm as the jaws of a steel trap. His thumbs gouged into Freese's windpipe.

Freese gasped. He heard strange sounds in his ears. Or was that the wailing of distant sirens? Frantically he tried again to wrench the strangling fingers from his throat. The pressure against his windpipe increased.

THE deputy's brain swam dizzily. Flashes of light were before his eyes. Or was that the beam of an auto's headlights shining through the dormer window, swinging across the ceiling? No matter. He could not hold out. He was suffocating. No he wasn't. He'd never been licked yet.

Suddenly Freese went limp. His hands thumped inertly to the floor. Then, with a last effort he raised his right thigh clear of the floor, and with his right hand dragged his pair of handcuffs from his hip pocket.

An instant later the steel bracelets closed with a click around the hands that were strangling him.

With a cry of rage the killer sprang up.

Freese gasped, filled his lungs with welcome air, wrapped his arms about the killer's ankles.

Swift ax blades slashed through the false wall at the end of the corridor. A portable floodlight sprayed a white glare through the broken partition. Federal men with tommy guns piled into the room, headed by Daniels, the district chief.

"Hello, Dan," said Freese weakly. "Glad you dropped in. But you won't need the tommyes."

Daniels was looking about him in amazement. The sealed room was a shambles as a result of the recent fight. Printing presses and a case of type had been upset. The floor was littered with engraved copper

plates, steel dies, cans of printers' ink, stacks of little red-covered booklets that resembled American passports—and a bloody sash weight.

Deputy Sheriff Skinny Bill Freese was looking at the three men who had come timidly into the room behind the Federals.

"Well, Bisbee," said Freese to the one-eyed caretaker, "I caught your ghost for you."

Bisbee's good eye stared incredulously at the manacled wrists of pale, disheveled Willis Maynard!

"Young Mr. Maynard?" Bisbee exclaimed shrilly. "Why, that ain't possible! It can't be him! Mr. Maynard was right with us when Corson was killed."

"No, he wasn't," Freese countered. "He was with us when Hank Corson walked into Maynard's trick gas chamber and got his lungs full o' nitrous oxide. Then Maynard joined us in the rush for the house, and he killed Corson while he was still unconscious from the laughing gas—killed him with that sash weight there—and dropped him out the dormer window into the shrubbery."

DANIELS, the Federal chief, went up to the handcuffed Maynard, sullenly silent, and scrutinized him closely.

"Maynard is the man Riggs was after all right," he said. "Riggs had located Maynard's San Diego agent, who was peddling forged American passports to immigrants waiting for visas in Tia Juana. His job was to find the man who made the passports."

"But surely," objected Dr. Coleman, "young Maynard wouldn't kill all these men over a matter of forged passports."

"No?" countered Daniels with a grim smile. "The phony passports were selling for a thousand dollars apiece. Just three a week meant an income of \$150,000 a year—and no income tax. I've known men who killed for a lot less."

"But Maynard himself was a victim—"

"That was a fake," declared Freese. "Maynard wasn't hurt bad,

you remember. He just staged the part-time insanity act to build up the haunted house idea strong, after old Bisbee started it with his ghost stories. He didn't want anybody to come near Maniac House to bother him while he was practisin' the art he learned in Paris—copper-plate and steel engravin' was his art specialties, looks like.

"And in case anybody did get curious about this room he'd sealed off to work in, he fixed it so they had to make an entrance through a little anteroom where they'd get put out cold with laughing gas. Then Maynard bashed in their heads and dragged the bodies out to the stairway—to fit in with Bisbee's ghost story. Course, he didn't get a chance to drag Hank Corson out there, because we were all in the house at the time."

"How'd you figure this out, Skinny?" asked Daniels.

"Well," said Freese, mopping the perspiration that was trickling off his ruddy face into the creases of his multiple chin, "when I see Hank Corson'd been killed—killed from the front—without drawin' his gun, then I knew Hank couldn't have been conscious at the time. Then I spotted Old Man Maynard's dentist chair down-cellar, and I remembered how Hank was laughin' all by himself before he died. So I figured it might be laughin' gas that made him unconscious. After that, all I did was get my gas-mask and look for the room with the dormer window that didn't show from the inside— Say, Dan, will you do me a favor?"

"What is it, Skinny?"

"Well, I know you got a call on this prisoner on Federal charges. But Maynard killed Hank Corson, and Hank was a friend o' mine. So I'd kind o' like to see him tried for murderin' Hank. Then maybe I'd be the one to take him up to the death house in San Quentin."

"He's yours, Skinny," said Daniels.

The quick grip of Deputy Sheriff Freese on Willis Maynard's arm had the finality of the hangman's noose.

MISTER FINIS

There was a rapid exchange of shots



A Complete By BENTON

Author of "Face Fixers,"

CHAPTER I

A DEAD MAN

JOBBER LEGG moved like a shadow through the narrow streets and murky alleys of the underworld district that had well earned the name of Street of Evil. His eyes were grim and eager in the knowledge that he was at last in a position to strike at Big Max Garst, the vicious mob leader. Jobber and his loyal friend and servant, Kimmel, had watched the Garst mob for weeks. Now Jobber was sure that he had better than an even chance to learn some of the details of the coup that he knew Big Max was planning.

Jobber stopped and looked back

Again the Mysterious Scourge of Gangdom

Meets a RAJAH



Mystery Novelette

BRADEN

"Execution Delayed," etc.

into the gloom with keen, searching eyes. For a moment he thought he saw a figure moving, a feminine figure. He frowned deeply as it occurred to him that it might be the figure of the girl of mystery who called herself Sheba Green.

Jobber Legg had no desire to be followed this night. Least of all by the wise and alluring Sheba. The girl was almost a complete enigma to Jobber.

Sheba Green seemed to be everywhere, to know everything that went on in the underworld. Indeed, it was her business to know. She sold information to crooks. Never to the cops. She was a personage of some power and was able to move through the warrens of the

Whirls into a Breath-Taking Crime Hunt!

underworld with perfect freedom, her person inviolate.

On certain occasions Jobber had paid her for information. And he had paid her for silence? For Sheba Green, other than Kimmel, was the only person in the world who knew that Jobber Legg, who posed as a cheap gunman, was really John Kent, a wealthy young bachelor who occupied a luxurious apartment on the Avenue and who was welcome in the socially distinguished homes of the city.

Beyond that, Sheba shared the secret that John Kent, alias Jobber Legg, was also the almost legendary Mister Finis, who on rare and appropriate occasions, managed to appear from nowhere with his flaming guns and deal death and destruction to leaders in the underworld.

Sheba knew too much!

At times greed seemed to be her controlling passion. Jobber Legg wondered if she would ever succumb to that greed and sell him out. He knew that the underworld was ready to pay any price to learn the identity of Mister Finis. The underworld had sworn a fate far worse than death for the avenger who dared to use against it the same tactics that it used against society. The cops, too, were out to put an end to the activities of Mister Finis because he scorned the slow processes of the law.

BUT the people covertly applauded him because the thunderbolts that he unleashed struck chilling fear into the hearts of the most savage criminals.

Jobber Legg, staring back into the blackness, saw no further movement. He concluded that his imagination had played him a trick. He skulked on through the alley. He moved slowly and warily now because he was approaching the dilapidated structure where Big Max Garst's mob would soon make rendezvous.

The building he approached was a very old three-storied brick house. The lower two floors were deserted, the doors of the rooms nailed tight.

It was a large room on the third floor that Big Max used for the meetings. The house was unapproachable by roofs, having a vacant lot on each side.

Jobber and Kimmel had watched the mob assemble there before. A guard was posted in the short first floor hall while the meetings were in progress. Big Max was doubtless confident that no one could enter the house without challenge.

No later than this morning Jobber had forced open one of the doors on the first floor that opened into the hall. He had removed the boards and nails that fastened it and substituted a latch bolt that could only be opened from the inside. He had loosened the boards at the single window so that entry would not be difficult.

He crept across the vacant lot at the west side of the house, reached the window, and noiselessly raised himself to the sill and crawled inside. Dusk had settled only half an hour since. It was a little after seven o'clock. Jobber knew that he would have about thirty minutes to wait, assuming that the mob met each time at the same hour.

He was wrong there. He had hardly crossed the room when he heard feet scraping on the floor of the short hall, heard the mutter of deep voices. He waited in silence a few minutes more. Again he heard men moving through the hall. A harsh voice spoke in a slightly raised tone. Jobber guessed that instructions were being given to the man who was to stand guard there. A minute later the stairs creaked. Then silence, except that the guard in the hall coughed a little at intervals.

Jobber waited a few minutes. He had no assurance that all the mob was assembled but, he reasoned, he could delay no longer. He slid back the latch that held the door, opened it slowly, inch by inch.

His eyes had become accustomed to the blackness of the room. The hall was dark, too, but it was not the pitchy blackness of the room. Jobber peered into the hall, saw the

figure that stood not three feet to his right, facing the street, leaning against the wall.

Jobber already had the blackjack in his hand. He took one long noiseless step, swung his weapon. He caught the guard as he collapsed and lowered him to the floor. He dragged the man into the room, bound and gagged him with materials placed there that morning.

BACK in the hall, he stepped to the doorway and raised a handkerchief above his head, quickly lowered it. His man, Kimmel, came gliding from across the street. Not a word passed between them. Kimmel, a gun in each hand, took his place in the hall. Jobber began a cautious ascent of the stairs.

He breathed more easily as he passed the second floor landing. He had not been sure about that. He reached the third floor. On down the hall he saw dim light shining through an open door. He smiled grimly. It was a temptation to appear in that doorway with guns in his hands and shoot down the mobsters who were so reckless as to draw against him.

As Mister Finis he might easily have done that. But the code of John Kent placed upon him certain restrictions. It permitted him only to attack criminals who were engaged in the commission of a crime and to kill only when his own life was at stake. As Jobber Legg he knew that Big Max was planning a major crime. The Street of Evil whispered that Big Max was ready to strike at once, and that the crime would be both spectacular and daring. Big Max had boasted that he and his men would clean up enough to fix them for keeps.

Jobber Legg was burning with curiosity to find out the nature of this impending crime. He and Kimmel had shadowed members of Big Max's mob for weeks, had listened to the gossip of the Street. Jobber knew it was now or never.

He did not move toward that lighted door. Instead, he turned to his right and mounted a third flight

of stairs, stairs that led to the roof, the roof that was inaccessible from any adjoining structure.

In another minute he was slowly bending his body forward and gazing down through the steel framework of a skylight into the lighted room below. Big Max, confident that he was protected from interference, had chosen that airy room for these warm and sultry nights.

Half of the panes of glass that had been set in the steel framework had been broken out. Jobber had an unobstructed view of the greater portion of the room below. There was a table directly beneath his eyes. About it were seated six men. The wide, bulky shoulders of Big Max and the large mass of rope-colored hair were unmistakable. Jobber was able to identify two other members of the mob. The faces of the other three were not visible to him.

Big Max was removing an envelope from his pocket. He opened it, removed a large sheet of paper, unfolded it, and spread it out on the table.

Jobber's eyes gleamed. He saw that it was some kind of a map. Jobber meant, at any risk, to get a good look at that map. Big Max was a little to Jobber's left. Jobber began to crawl along the edge of the skylight.

His left hand suddenly came in contact with something soft. It was cloth. Jobber moved his hand and explored. His gasp was almost audible. His hand felt flesh. Jobber jerked a pencil flashlight from his pocket, shaded its beam with his hands, and stared.

The narrow shaft of light was centered on the face of a man. In that first instant Jobber knew that the man was dead. He knew that he had never seen the face before. He knew now why the stairs had creaked so heavily when he had been hidden in the first floor room. Big Max and his men had carried the body up with them a few minutes before.

Swiftly Jobber went through the pockets of the man's suit. There

was nothing in them. He used his light again guardedly. It was not a cheap suit that the victim was clad in. Jobber thrust his fingers into the inside coat pocket, held it open while he played his light on it. There was a name written there on a small white strip of cloth that had been sewed into the pocket. The name was J. C. Winterhauser.

The name meant nothing to Jobber. Yet, he was quite sure that the death of this man was a link in the crime that Big Max was about to execute. Jobber's eyes were anxious, excited. Big Max, with the map before him, was speaking slowly and forcefully. Jobber had to hear what was being said.

CHAPTER II

THE MYSTERIOUS MAP



JOBBER crawled over the body and moved along the skylight until he was directly over Big Max. The five men were leaning over the table, paying a vivid attention to every word that fell from Big Max's lips.

"Get it?" Big Max's voice rumbled. "Ain't it the sweetest lineup that a mob ever tumbled into. If we take this trick we can live the life of Riley for a hundred years. And we can't miss! It's a sure thing. An inside job and covered both ways. I gotta laugh when I think of how easy it's gonna be."

"It's apples, all right, Max," a hoarse voice agreed. "But how come you got next to a setup like that? How can you be sure you're right?"

"That's somethin' I was comin' to," Big Max chuckled. "I ain't sore because maybe some of you figure I wasn't smart enough to figure this out all by myself. Hell, I wasn't. The guy that doped this out has seventeen different kinds of grey matter. He's got more brains in a minute than I'd have in seven lifetimes. I got a right to be proud that he picked my mob to do the rough stuff. It proves we're big time guys now."

"You're sure this bird is on the level?" the hoarse voice asked tensely.

"Of course he's on the level! Wait till you hear his name. I ain't told you before because he didn't want it even breathed he was in these parts. He even insisted that I shouldn't tell you at all. But you know me! I don't hold nothin' back from my pals when we go into action. And you'd never guess who the guy is that's playin' ball with us on this job."

"Who?" the five men chorused.

Big Max leaned back in his chair. He was enjoying the drama that he knew he was about to create.

"Frenchie Delott!" he said.

The magic in that name affected Jobber Legg as well as the men in the room below. Frenchie Delott! What crook hadn't heard that name? What big shot of the underworld didn't bow to Frenchie Delott as the smartest, most ruthless man in his line? Frenchie Delott would sneer at loot of less than half a million. A hold-up or a snatch he would have considered crude and primitive crime. Frenchie used brains.

Jobber Legg knew that he was hot on a clever and unusual crime. Feverishly he jerked from his pocket the glasses that he always carried. He focused them on the map below. If he could only get one good look at that map! But the method was hopeless. The paper through the glasses was only a blur.

But Jobber had come prepared. He had known that it would be more than likely that he would be confronted with a similar situation to this. He took from another pocket a small box. In it was a small object attached to a long piece of thin cord. He held it in his hand and waited. Big Max had his finger on the map.

"It's all set out here, and we can't go wrong. I got a complete map of the first floor of the house and the notes in the corner that Frenchie prepared tells us exactly what we're gonna be up against. I already told Corbett what his job is. He'll be

planted right there," he pointed to a spot on the map, and waiting for us. It couldn't be no easier. We gotta hand it to Frenchie Delott. It took brains to dope this out."

"Does Frenchie himself think it's gonna be as easy as you do, Max?" the man on his left asked.

"He says it's a cinch! All but the timing. He warned me time and time again about that. It's all timed right down to the last T. We can't make any slip-ups on that. The gong strikes at midnight—right on the dot at midnight. We can't be a minute off or somethin' might go wrong. But, hell, that's easy enough. If we're too dumb to read our watches we ought to get rooked."

"Just how much is the loot gonna be?"

MAX leaned back in his chair again. "I don't know," he said solemnly. "Nobody knows just how much junk there is in that dump. The papers have, at various times, guessed from one to five millions. Even Frenchie Delott don't know that. But it's plenty. Plenty so that we can give Frenchie half and still split a big fortune among us."

"What's the difference if we do run into a little trouble?" the thin-faced man at the end of the table said harshly. Jobber knew his name was Gimp Sturms. "For a wad like that we can afford to take chances—and gun everybody out that gets in our way."

"Right, Gimp," Big Max chuckled. "It's the chance that only comes once in a lifetime to guys like us. Now do you all understand? If you got any more questions to ask you'd better pipe up now."

Jobber was moving hastily. He sensed that the meeting might break up at any moment now. Big Max might reach out, fold the map, put it back in the envelope and put it in his pocket.

Jobber was lowering his slender cord through the skylight. There was a little leaden weight on the end of that cord. Around the lead was wrapped a bit of sponge, and on the sponge was glue. The sponge

down three feet, Jobber had to stop and untangle a bit of the cord.

His lips twisted bitterly as Big Max reached out his right hand and took hold of the map. He folded it and placed it in the envelope. Just then the thin-faced man at the end of the table spoke to him. Big Max turned, removed his hand, and left the envelope lying on the table.

Jobber had untangled his cord. He leaned far over the open triangle of the section of the skylight and poised the weighted end of the cord. His eyes glittered with hope and anxiety as the bit of sponge sank lower and lower.

It was almost above Big Max's eyes as Big Max turned back and looked again to his right. Jobber squinted his eyes and took a final sight.

Then with a sudden movement he thrust down his arms to their full length. The weighted sponge struck squarely on the envelope. Jobber let it rest for only a fraction of a second. Then he hauled up fast.

The man across the table from Big Max yelled and grabbed for the envelope. But the glue held, and the envelope fluttered upward as Jobber frantically hauled. The men below were on their feet. Guns were being jerked from their holsters.

Two of those guns roared as Jobber jerked the envelope through the skylight. The shots were wild. Glass crashed in the remaining segments of panes that had held to the steel frame throughout the years. But Jobber was already back, crouching out of the line of fire.

"He's on the roof!" Big Max was bawling. "He can't get away! Everybody! Up after him! Nail him and leave him up there to rot with the other one!"

Feet scrambled and chairs were overturned as Big Max led the mad rush for the door. They were shouting and cursing as they raced through the hall that led to the stairs.

Jobber Legg waited coolly for five seconds. Then he leaped back to the skylight and peered down. The room was deserted. Jobber had al-

ready torn the envelope from the sponge and thrust it into his right hand coat pocket. He moved with the agility of a great cat, caught the steel frame with both hands, swung himself down into the room below. He hung there for an instant, listened to the feet of Big Max and his men as they raced up the stairs to the roof.

Jobber dropped and landed lightly in the center of the table. He seized the electric lamp that rested on one corner of the table and hurled it through the single window of the room. The room was in darkness as the glass shattered.

He raced into the hall as orange flames burst from the skylight above him. Big Max's men were firing blindly, desperately, in the hope a wild shot would bring down their quarry.

JOBBER LEGG was grinning as he reached the stairs that led below. He heard Big Max roaring orders to go back down the stairs. Some of the men had anticipated that order. They were tumbling down the third flight as Jobber was going down the second flight. Jobber turned the corner of the second floor landing, wheeled and waited. He fired a single shot upward as he saw two faint shadows reach the landing above.

Guns threw lead down at him as Big Max and the others joined the two on the third floor landing. Jobber sensed that someone was already testing the stairs. Jobber exposed himself a little. Coolly he raked the stairway above him. He smiled as the shadows above vanished. Even Big Max, in his blind rage, would not dare to try the stairs in the face of that steady, blistering fire.

Jobber turned, and without holstering his guns, leaped down the steps to the first floor landing. Kimmel was waiting there for him, the darkness concealing the relief that shone in his face.

Jobber opened the door of the room by which he had entered the building. He took Kimmel by the

arm. "This way, Kimmel." Jobber paused and closed the hall door as he shoved Kimmel into the room. "I got more than I hoped for—a map in my pocket," he gasped, breathing heavily. "Now, follow me, Kimmel. Through the window. The mob will try the stairs in a minute. But we'll be well away by that time."

He found the window, raised it, pushed Kimmel through ahead of him. Together they sped across the vacant lot, made the alley in the rear and turned to the left. They heard shouts and shots from the old house they had just left—but Jobber was slowing to a walk and smiling his triumph.

"I'm patting myself on the back a little for pulling that trick," he exclaimed to Kimmel. "I don't know just what I've got but I'm sure it's the tip-off to a big—"

Jobber's smile faded as he reached for the right hand pocket of his coat. He stopped and a miserable groan slipped from his lips. The envelope for which he had risked so much was gone!

He stood there in the darkness for a full minute before he told Kimmel what had happened. He searched his clothes thoroughly in spite of the fact that he was quite sure the envelope had been in the right hand pocket of his coat. At first he was determined to return and look for the envelope but Kimmel took a firm stand against such foolhardiness.

"I guess you're right, Kimmel." He shrugged his disgust. "It would be too much like stepping into a hornet's nest. Anyway, Big Max and his mob will search the house from cellar to attic and they're bound to find the envelope in that room. I know that a major crime is to be committed at midnight, that Big Max and his mob are going to commit it.

"I also know that Frenchie Delott is behind the whole thing and that means a daring stroke with much loot at stake. Even if we are too late to step in on them we'll know where the trail leads. It should be

the easiest thing in the world to close in on them, once we learn the stunt they have pulled. Not that I'm giving up. It's just possible that we may be able to get set for them yet. It's hardly eight. That gives us at least four hours."

CHAPTER III

ENTER SHEBA GREEN



JOHN KENT had been in his apartment on the Avenue less than thirty minutes. During that time the shabby clothes, the matted hair, the darkly stained face and the snarl of Jobber Legg had disappeared. He paced slowly up and down the living room, a puzzled expression on his well-molded, youthful face. Kimmel, seated in a chair near the door, watched him expectantly.

"I can't find a starting point," Kent muttered, as much to himself as to Kimmel. "If Big Max Garst were alone on this job I'd know about what to expect. A daring stick-up, a rough and ready crime. But Frenchie Delott is known to have a weakness for crimes involving gems. It may be that he has planned to wreck one of the vaults of the downtown jewelry concerns. But there are a hundred such vaults. It's like trying to find the proverbial needle in the—"

He broke off as the front door buzzer sounded. Kimmel rose and glided through the foyer to the door. Kent heard a short and brief argument.

He turned and a light frown spread over his features. Sheba Green stood in the doorway. Kimmel, a look of distaste on his face was standing just behind her.

Sheba Green looked amused. Without invitation she crossed to a table, took a cigarette from a lacquered case, lighted it, and seated herself comfortably in a silk-upholstered chair. Kent stared a little. This was a Sheba Green that the Street of Evil never saw. The cheap dress that she ordinarily wore was

gone. Her white shoulders gleamed above an evening dress that suggested roses and silver. Kent could find no fault in her appearance. She would have passed inspection in any gathering.

"I suppose, Sheba," Kent murmured, "that this is just an informal call."

"You might call it that," she replied, smiling. "I really dropped in to give you a hint, a hint as to what will happen if Big Max Garst gets his hands on you."

Kent started a little and his eyes narrowed. "You have an annoying habit of talking in riddles, Sheba," he said lightly. "I'm a bit out of touch with the affairs of the street. Why should Big Max Garst have it in for me?"

Her laugh was musical—and ironic. "On second thought he doesn't have it in for you, John Kent. His anger is centered on a rather despicable character who calls himself Jobber Legg. It seems that Big Max had a meeting with his mob a short while ago. This Jobber Legg, always a very nosey individual, managed to be present. And he managed to get hold of a map that—"

"So it was you, Sheba, that was following me tonight?" Kent interrupted, his voice harshly accusing.

"And why not?" she countered, her eyes twinkling at his discomfiture. "Word reached me a few days ago that Jobber Legg was asking questions, that he was becoming very much interested in the affairs of Big Max. You know I'm curious. And that I always have an eye open for business. It seemed that somewhere along the line an opportunity would arise for me to make an honest dollar. So when I saw you skulking through the alleys of the Street tonight I decided I might as well follow you to see what was going on."

"And you were right on my heels when I entered the house? You followed me in?" he challenged.

"Yes. It looked for a minute as though I had made a tragic mistake. I stood by the window for

awhile. My curiosity got the better of me. I crawled through the window. The first thing I knew hell broke loose above. There was a lot of shooting. For the moment I lost my head. I jumped back in a corner and stood there, shivering. Then two men came into the room. They stopped by the door a moment and—

"Sheba!" Kent's eyes were dark and furious. "You got my map! You picked my pocket as I stood inside the door for a moment and spoke to Kimmel. You stole my map!"

"Your map?" She accented the first word, her tone taunting. "I was under the impression that your title to it was extremely faulty. From all that I saw and heard I was firmly convinced that the map belonged to Big Max, and that Jobber Legg had committed a rather low bit of thievery. I understand that Jobber fished it from right in front of Big Max's eyes with a bit of stickum on the end of a string. Of course I couldn't be absolutely sure that the map belonged to Big—"

"How much, Sheba?" Kent's tone was caustic as he thought he detected the gleaming greed in her eyes. "How much for the map?"

SHE leaned back in her chair, drew deeply on her cigarette, blew a heavy cloud of smoke toward the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," she said, and her voice was mocking. "Very sorry that I am not able to take your money and deliver the map to you. I've already disposed of it."

"You—"

"I sold it back to Big Max Garst for three hundred dollars. You know my motto. Quick deals and small profits!"

Kent gazed at her for a full minute, bitter disappointment in his face. Sheba tossed her head and laughed delightedly.

"Perhaps it will be a good lesson for you, John Kent," she said. "No one should ever be careless with important papers. But you can't com-

plain. The map didn't belong to you and you're not out anything."

Kent turned in disgust and walked slowly across the room. He suddenly whirled and pointed a forefinger at her.

"But you looked at the map, Sheba. And I'll wager my life that you inspected that map closely before you sold it back to Big Max!"

She smiled broadly. "Now that you remind me of it, I believe I did, John. It seems to me that I have a distinct recollection of—"

"Name your price, Sheba! I want to know what was written on the corner of the map."

"I always try to be reasonable in my demands," she said archly. "Let's see. I charged Big Max three hundred for the map. I should say that half that much, a hundred and fifty, would be a fair—"

"Get the money, Kimmel!" Kent ordered shortly. Kimmel disappeared into the hall that led to the rear of the apartment. He returned quickly, counted bills into Sheba Green's waiting hand.

"Thank you," she acknowledged cheerfully. "I'll tell you what I remember about the map. It was the plan of a house. There was one room in that house that seemed, from marks on the map, to be particularly important."

"Whose house?" Kent demanded eagerly.

"I don't know. But," she added quickly as she saw the disappointment in his face, "there was an address printed at the corner of the map. It was 1819 Leverly Place."

"Leverly Place. I know most of the homes on that street," Kent mused thoughtfully, "but I can't place that number. Get our cross-index, Kimmel!"

"There was one other note in the corner that you might be interested in," Sheba went on. "It was: 'Corbett inside, guard.'"

"Nothing else?" Kent urged.

"Nothing but some marks I didn't understand. That's all I can tell you about the map. But I know that one of Big Max's men saw your face. Jobber's face, rather, as you jerked

the envelope up through the skylight. I told Big Max that I saw you drop the envelope as you ran from the house and that I picked it up. He figured that you didn't have time to look at it, that you had all your trouble for nothing."

"The house in Leverly Place," Kimmel announced, looking up from the index, "belongs to Custer Simms."

"Simms?" Kent repeated blankly. "I don't believe I've ever heard the name."

"But that won't cramp your style much, will it, John?" Sheba chuckled. "I wouldn't be surprised that you'd find out several things about Mr. Simms in the next few hours—and pass the information on to the notorious Mister Finis!"

Kent flushed a little. "I don't know, Sheba. I'm afraid I'm condemned to a quiet evening at home tonight."

"We'll see," she chuckled as she rose.

"I knew it!" Kent said darkly. "You're planning to watch every move I make. How much, Sheba? How much for your promise not to trail me tonight, for your promise not to skulk about the house at Leverly Place tonight?"

She stared in surprise at him for a moment, seemed about to refuse to quote him a price. Then her eyes sparkled.

"A hundred," she offered. "Give me a hundred and I'll promise not to trail you or skulk about that house tonight."

"Go ahead and give her the money, Kimmel."

Sheba drew her cape about her shoulders and strolled to the door, waited until Kimmel had placed the money in her hand. Then she murmured a cheerful "good night" and hurried from the apartment.

"I don't trust her," Kimmel said darkly. "She's only waiting to get her price. Some day she'll sell you out—tell the mobsters just who Mister Finis is! And that will mean—sure death!"

"Possibly," Kent agreed mildly. "It's possible that Sheba might sell

me out to Big Max tonight. But—what can we do about it?"

"Nothing!" Kimmel said gloomily. "Nothing!"

"But we have plenty to do tonight, Kimmel," Kent said quickly. "I lied a bit for Sheba's benefit. Custer Simms and I are not altogether unacquainted. We meet in the same clubs rather often. The minute his name was mentioned I began to have an inkling of Big Max's scheme. Simms is a very wealthy man and the ruling passion of his life is gems. He's traveled the earth to add to his collections."

"I've heard of him," Kimmel said. "The papers write him up every time he comes back from one of his trips."

"Right. You remember the Culet diamond necklace, Kimmel, that my mother left me. I showed it to Simms once, asked his opinion on it. He said that he had never seen finer, more exquisitely cut gems. He wanted to buy them from me. I refused to sell for sentimental reasons. That gives me an idea."

"What?" Kimmel asked.

But Kent seemed not to have heard him. He strode up and down the room for five minutes. Then he stopped abruptly.

"We'll have to hurry, Kimmel!" he said sharply. "Help me get into evening clothes!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MAHARAJAH



It was exactly ten-thirty when John Kent gave his card to the butler at the Simms home. The butler left him standing in the long, lofty hall and disappeared through a door at the right which Kent knew led into a large drawing room. In a moment Custer Simms—short, slender, pleasant-faced—came hurrying into the hall.

"Hello, Kent," he said warmly, his hand outstretched. "I'm very glad to see you. Come right on in. Expecting company in a half hour or so. But that makes no difference."

"I just happened to be driving by," Kent said casually as they entered the drawing room, arm in arm. "Guessed from the lights that you were at home this evening. I recalled that you wanted me to sell you the Culette diamond necklace a couple of years ago. At that time I wasn't in the mood to dispose of them."

"I'd still like to have the Culette diamonds," Simms said quickly. "They were cut by a real artist. You'd like to sell them now?"

"Not exactly." Kent paused as though he were embarrassed. "You see, I want to make a gift to a certain young lady. She doesn't care for diamonds. It occurred to me that you might be able to make me a trade, pearls for instance. She likes pearls. Or emeralds."

"Splendid!" Simms ejaculated. "I don't believe I'll have any trouble making a trade with you. I can assure you that you won't get the worst of it, either. I mean as a matter of dollars and cents."

"I know that, Simms. That's why I decided to come to you rather than a jeweler. And I don't doubt that you have a better selection than most business concerns."

"I have," Simms smiled. "I'll show you some pearls and emeralds that few people are privileged to see."

"Fine. You just name a time that is convenient to you when I may see them."

Custer Simms hesitated for a moment and looked thoughtful. "Why not?" he finally asked himself aloud. "Of course. You may see them tonight. But not until midnight."

He laughed as Kent looked puzzled. "Come with me, Kent, and I'll explain."

Simms led the way back into the hall. They turned to the right. Ten feet further Simms turned into a narrow corridor that ran to the left. On fifteen more feet was a door. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked the door.

"You've never seen my vault, have you, Kent?" He opened the door and switched on lights.

The room was about twelve feet square. The wall of the farther side seemed to be of solid steel. In it was an ordinary vault door with what appeared to be an ordinary combination lock.

"I can't open the safe except at certain times when the time lock is set," Simms went on in explanation. "The safe sets inside the vault. It happens that the clocks are set for midnight—exactly. Because of a special appointment I have made. There's no reason why you can't join me and my other guest at that time."

"I'D be delighted," Kent assured him. "I've heard much about your collections and this impregnable vault in which you keep them."

"I believe it is impregnable," Simms smiled. "The only chance I take is when I open it. I always choose unusual hours for those occasions and take precautions to see that the secret is kept by invited guests. Tonight I am entertaining a very famous personage. One of the greatest owners and experts on rare gems in the world—The Maharajah of Singhol. You may have noticed the news of his arrival in the papers."

"I did," Kent confirmed. "I believe he is staying in some state at the Regent-Savoy."

"Right. I called on him this morning, invited him to inspect my stuff. He is a real lover of gems; he accepted eagerly. And agreed to come in the utmost secrecy. He was educated in England and is very democratic. He realized that I couldn't make a show of it here, receive him in state. He is going to slip out of the hotel about eleven and come alone. You shall stay, Kent. Meet the Maharajah and see my collection."

"I'm very grateful for the opportunity," Kent said quickly.

Simms glanced at his watch. "It's getting along toward eleven," he said. "I might as well open the door of the outside vault now so I won't be bothered later."

He stepped forward and knelt be-

fore the steel door, began to twirl the dial.

He opened the door, stepped into the vault and pressed a light switch.

There was an open space about seven feet square at the front of the vault. In the rear part of the vault a massive safe of glistening metal was built into a floor that also seemed to be constructed of steel.

"We're all set now," Simms said. "It will take me only a minute to open the safe after the time lock goes off at midnight."

He stepped back and closed the door of the vault, but did not spin the dial. The butler appeared in the doorway at that instant.

"The man from the Ward agency is here," he announced.

"Wait here, Kent," Simms said. "I'll be right back." He followed the butler into the corridor.

KENT moved swiftly. He went to the door and looked to the right. He glided quickly down to the end of the corridor. He threw aside heavy drapes, saw the window. He released the heavy catch on the window, raised the lower sash a fraction of an inch. In another fifteen seconds he was back in the vault room.

He had moved none too quickly. Custer Simms appeared almost immediately. He was followed by a stocky, heavy-faced man.

"As a precaution I always have a man from the Ward Protective Agency present," Simms explained to Kent. "He can give a quick alarm if anything goes wrong." He turned to the man. "We have an hour or so, yet. You can make yourself comfortable here, Winterhauser."

Winterhauser! Kent fought to keep his face expressionless. Yet only three hours ago he had looked into the face of a dead man whose coat bore a label on which was written "J. C. Winterhauser." The stocky man was evidently Corbett, noted on the map as an "inside guard," if Sheba had read correctly.

Simms had already taken Kent by the arm and was conducting him

back to the drawing room. The butler opened the front door as they stepped into the hall.

Simms rushed forward and greeted the dark-skinned man who entered the door. He was of medium height, very slender, clad in somber black except for the turban that was twisted about his head. Simms turned and ushered his guest toward the door of the drawing room where Kent stood waiting.

"Kent, I want to present you to my very distinguished guest, the Maharajah of—"

"Just make it plain Mr. Singhol," the Maharajah interrupted pleasantly. "I am not going to insist on formality. I am very democratic tonight. I left my apartment at the hotel by means of a freight lift, sneaked out in order that I might come alone and in secret. I think I deceived your smart newspaper men although they usually watch me very closely." He spoke easily although precisely and with a certain sibilancy peculiar to the Indian.

"As a matter of fact," he continued as they seated themselves in the drawing room, "the royal robes are getting a bit thin. My grandfather now was a real Maharajah. He had the power of life and death over millions of people. But I? I am only a puppet. A British administrator tells me what I may and may not do. Is it any wonder that I devote myself to precious jewels? And to travel?" He shrugged his shoulders as he put the question.

"I'll venture that you'd not trade your stones for the full powers that your grandfather exercised, though," Simms said.

"No," he agreed promptly. "I would rather have one flawless, perfectly cut diamond than all the power in the world."

"Mr. Kent is an old friend of mine," Simms explained to the Maharajah. "He happened to be passing by and dropped in. I have invited him to stay until midnight and join us in the vault."

"I am charmed," the Maharajah

smiled. "Is he also one of us? A lover of gems?"

"Not exactly. But he happens to be the owner of a diamond necklace that is of more than ordinary interest. Not in its value but in the way the stones are cut. The diamonds are small but perfect and cut in a delicate, fragile design that fascinates one. I wish we had your necklace here, Kent."

"I think I can arrange it," Kent replied quickly. "The necklace is at my apartment. I can easily get it and make it back here by midnight or a few minutes after. If you will only—"

He stopped speaking as voices, slightly raised in argument, sounded in the hall. A moment later the butler appeared in the doorway.

"There is a reporter for the *Times-Journal* at the door," he stammered. "A young lady. I'm having a bit of a time getting rid of her."

"Tell her to leave instantly," Simms ordered.

"I did, sir, but she refused. She said, using her own words, that there was something up here, and that if I didn't let her in she'd call her paper and have a yardful of reporters and cameramen here in no time. I didn't think you'd want that."

"Heavens, no!" Simms exclaimed. He pondered a minute. Then rose and went into the hall. He returned with a smile on his face. "I decided to let her join us rather than let her carry out her threat. She appears to be an extraordinary young woman, both capable and attractive."

He waited until the young lady appeared in the doorway. Kent gasped as Simms presented her to the Maharajah. The capable and attractive young lady was the ubiquitous Sheba Green. Simms turned to Kent.

"But I've met Mr. Kent before," she said with huge enjoyment before Simms could speak. "I've met him several times before. We really are quite well acquainted."

"Of course," Kent said a little awkwardly, his face a bit red. "I'm

very glad to see you again, Miss—Miss—"

"Jones," she gushed. "Surely you haven't forgotten me. I'm one of the Jones twins. I'm the one that works on the *Times-Journal*."

"I remember you perfectly," Kent chuckled. "And how did you guess that there was news in this house tonight?" But if he thought that would confuse Sheba he was disappointed.

"Why, I've been keeping an eye on the Maharajah ever since he arrived in town," she answered quickly. "The editor left him to me. I bribed maids and porters in the hotel. One of the porters phoned me that he had slipped out of the hotel alone. The porter heard the address the Maharajah gave the taxi driver. Simple, wasn't it?"

"These American reporters!" the Maharajah exclaimed. "It is impossible to defeat them."

Kent moved toward the door. "I'll run along and get my necklace," he told Simms. "Be back just as soon as I can make it."

CHAPTER V

MR. FINIS CALLS



KENT'S eyes were sober and thoughtful as he left the house. He would have liked to have chased Sheba Green from that house but she was the one person in the world that he dared not denounce. What kind of a game was she playing tonight? Was Kimmel right? Had Sheba sold him out and thrown in with Big Max Garst for a share of the loot they expected to take tonight? Sheba had rattled off her story about the Maharajah without moving an eyelash. Either she was in with Big Max or she was a very, very clever girl who could think like lightning in a pinch.

Kent frowned darkly as he climbed into his car. In a very short time he would have all the answers to the questions that surged in his mind. He glanced at his watch, then started his motor. He drove

slowly, making a circuit of perhaps ten blocks. When he parked his car again he was hardly two blocks from the house of Custer Simms.

He put on a very thin black top-coat. In each pocket he slipped a heavy automatic and two extra clips. He got out of his car, walked to the next corner, crossed the street and faded into the shadows between two large houses. He moved slowly, warily, picking his way diagonally across the block.

IN three minutes he was crouching beneath a window. He took a thin black silk mask from his pocket and adjusted it across the upper part of his face. With his right hand he reached up to the window. The lower sash was as he had left it a short time before, raised just enough to permit him to slip his fingers between it and the sill.

Again he glanced at the glowing hands of his wrist-watch. It was very close to midnight. He put the fingers of both hands beneath the window and began to push it steadily upward. He raised it two feet.

The heavy drapes inside cut off his vision. But the murmur of voices reached his ears. Then he heard the clear musical laugh of Sheba Green.

Sheba was rising from her chair as she uttered that laugh. She turned her shapely shoulders and strolled carelessly into the hall. It was just two minutes to twelve.

Custer Simms looked at his watch and got to his feet. "I think," he said to his guest, "that we might as well go to the vault room. The time lock will go off on the second. By the time we get there I should be able to open the safe."

The Maharajah nodded and rose. "Just as you say, my friend. I am—"

At that instant there was a crash at the front door. Feet pounded into the hall. Before Simms or the Maharajah could take more than a step they were staring at the muzzles of the guns of Big Max Garst and four of his men.

"Stick 'em up!" Big Max bel-

lowed. "Stick 'em up or we'll mow you down!"

Sheba Green, in the hall, collapsed at the first word. She went to her knees, then stretched out on the floor in what appeared to be a dead faint. The butler, at the far side of the drawing room, dropped the tray with three glasses on it, and shot his hands upward as high as he could reach.

Big Max's eyes settled on Simms. "We got you on the hip, Simms," he gloated, "and you might as well make the best of it. We know your safe is set to open at midnight and we're gonna clean it out for you. Jerky! Gus. Tie 'em up!"

Two men moved from behind Big Max and ran into the room. They had cords and cloth in their hands. They forced Simms and the Maharajah to lie down on the floor. In a minute both men were bound and gagged. The butler received the same treatment.

A third man had stooped over the prostrate form of Sheba Green. He grinned as he tied her ankles together, looped a cord about her body and arms, and thrust a gag into her mouth. She was lying flat on her face, and breathed easy again when the thug strode off without recognizing her.

"Leave 'em right where they are," Big Max ordered. "Things are breakin' pretty enough. Come on!" He started through the hall, his four men trooping along at his heels.

"It's a cinch!" Big Max exulted as they turned into the vault room corridor. "Corbett got to a phone right after he come in. Said the vault was already open. We'll look the box over, then shove Simms in here and make him open it. It's just midnight and we got plenty of—"

He stopped and stared as he stepped into the vault room. "Where's that heel of a Corbett?" he grated. "I told him to stick right here."

Big Max rushed across the room and seized the lever that controlled the vault door, turned it, and pulled.

The vault door swung open. A light flamed from the ceiling of the vault as the door opened. Big Max cried out and leaped back.

He stared. Stared at the man in evening dress who stood before that light, stared at the masked face and the menacing automatics. Max's eyes bulged as he saw that the menacing figure was standing astride the unconscious form of Corbett, the fake guard.

"Who—who—" Big Max gulped and shrank backward.

"I am sometimes called Mister Finis, Max," came the steely answer.

Big Max yelled and leaped to his right. One of the men behind him whipped up a gun and fired. And then the room was filled with a deafening roar. Big Max and his men leaped from side to side, snapping shot after shot into the interior of the vault.

THE guns of Mister Finis were not idle either. After the first shot he had smashed out the light above his head. Now he sprang from one side of the vault to the other, firing steadily, surely, at the fleeting portions of bodies that came within his view.

Big Max shouted and cursed, exhorted his men with the promise of the riches that lay within the vault.

Mister Finis was fighting with his back to the wall. Fighting with the skill that had come to him in years of daily practise on his private range, with the confidence of one who knows that every bit of lead is reaching the mark toward which it is aimed. He knew that three of Big Max's men were down already. They returned his fire wildly, not daring to stand and face him.

His close quarters were reeking with the acrid smell of powder. Outside he saw, in the haze, a sharp face, another gun turning, in a quick jerk, toward him. And again Mister Finis squeezed his trigger and saw the man drop like a plummet.

As he fired Big Max Garst dove across the room and out the door.

He made no effort to shoot. His only concern now was to get himself out of range of the deadly fire that came from the vault. He made the corridor a fraction of a second before Mister Finis could swing his gun.

Mister Finis was out of the vault, leaping toward that door. He reached it, sprang into the corridor in time to see Big Max leaping through the open window at the end of the corridor. Mister Finis grinned mirthlessly and went after him.

He turned as he reached the window and shot out the ceiling light in the corridor. Then he put a hand on the sill and swung through the window, landed lightly on the grass outside.

Orange flame blazed from the hedge ahead of him. Mister Finis crouched, fired two blind shots at the hedge, and ran forward. He dropped to his knees as he reached the hedge. He listened intently, heard no sound. His eyes, unaccustomed to the darkness, could see nothing.

He slipped the thin topcoat from his shoulders, hung the collar over the muzzle of the gun in his left hand. He raised himself a little, pushed the coat over the hedge, slowly moved it outward. Big Max, crouched on the opposite side of the hedge some twenty feet away, saw that moving shadow. He bared his teeth and aimed carefully.

Mister Finis felt the coat jerking under the impact of the slugs from Big Max's exploding gun. Mister Finis leaned over the hedge. The gun in his right hand fired once. Then he ran down the hedge. For perhaps thirty seconds he knelt over the body of Big Max. Then he moved swiftly across the lawns toward his car.

For five minutes he drove like a robot. His face was creased in a thoughtful frown. Finally he smiled grimly. He parked, went into a drug store, and phoned. Then he drove back to the Simms house.

He shrugged as he saw that the police were already in the house. He walked through the open door.

Simms saw him and shouted, "You missed it, Kent! We were held up! A gang tried to rob my vault. But Mister Finis stopped them!"

"That's what this girl says. But does she know what she's talking about?" Inspector Crane put that question. He was looking at Sheba Green who was standing between Simms and the Maharajah.

"I'm sure it was Mister Finis!" Sheba said without looking at Kent. "You see, I was in the hall when the bandits rushed in. I saw their guns and fainted." Kent couldn't suppress a smile at that. "I fainted and fell flat," she went on. "My head was just even with the corridor that leads to the vault. When I came to, there was a battle going on in the vault room. A moment later a man ran out, sprinted down the corridor and jumped through the window.

"A second man ran after him. He was in full dress. He had a mask over his eyes. I knew it was Mister Finis. I've read all about Mister Finis and I'm sure I can't be mistaken."

"She's right!" A detective, who had just come in, said tersely. "We just found Big Max Garst out there by a hedge. He was dead. His shirt front was opened and there was a three and a naught on his chest. Thirty! That's why the papers nicknamed him Mister Finis, you know."

"You're wanted on the phone, Inspector!" someone called out. Inspector Crane pushed his way into the hall, seized the phone.

The Maharajah turned to Custer Simms. "I'm very sorry that I must leave," he said smoothly. "But this publicity will not be pleasant for me. The British government will criticise me for becoming involved—"

"No apologies," Simms smiled. "You'd better hurry. The reporters will be swarming in—"

"I'm most pleased to have met you, Mr. Singhol," Kent interrupted as he seized the Maharajah's hand and began to pump it vigorously. "I'm extremely sorry that you have been subjected to this annoyance."

The Maharajah looked annoyed, tried to withdraw his hand, but Kent held on and continued to shake with excessive friendliness.

Inspector Crane was shouting as he burst back into the drawing room. He rushed at the Maharajah and tore the turban from his head.

"The Maharajah of Singhol, eh?" he yelled. "Well, this Mister Finis just phoned in and tipped Headquarters that you are a phony. And by Heavens! He was right. You're Frenchie Delott!"

"You must be mistaken," Custer Simms frowned. "I examined some of his papers and—"

"No mistake about it!" Inspector Crane yelled. "See that scar over his right ear. It was that stain on his face and that turban that fooled me. He's Frenchie Delott! Internationally known as the greatest jewel robber in the world! And this is just the kind of a job he would be trying to pull. We got you right this time, Frenchie!"

"Nuts!" Frenchie said in great disgust. "I should have known better than to tie up with a dumb yegg like Big Max Garst."

SHEBA GREEN sat beside John Kent as he drove the coupé away from the Simms house.

"You put me on the spot with your smart question," she chided him. "I had to do some quick guessing. I had already guessed a bit when I saw the fake Maharajah get out of a taxi and enter the house just ahead of me."

"You crossed me yourself," Kent accused. "You took my hundred bucks and promised not to—"

"—not to trail you or skulk about the Simms house. I didn't. I knew the address before you did and didn't have to trail you. And I didn't skulk. I marched right up to the front door and walked in, and if I misrepresented a little, it was my affair. How did you guess that the Maharajah was a fake?"

"Because I hadn't seen anything of Frenchie Delott. I knew he wasn't in the bunch that came with

Big Max. He wasn't the guard that I knocked out and dragged into the vault with me. Yet I knew that Frenchie wasn't the kind to stay completely in the background. I knew he was somewhere on the job. I puzzled it out while I was driving around after the fight. The Hindu was the only person left that I hadn't accounted for. He had to be Frenchie. I phoned the cops, knowing that they would soon find out. I held on to him until Inspector Crane jerked the turban off his head."

"I'll bet," she laughed, "you thought I was selling you out to Big Max when I marched in and joined the party."

"The idea did occur to me, Sheba," he admitted.

"I can't quite make up my mind to do that," she said, her eyes sparkling, mischievous. "Of course, I could get a very tidy sum for telling what I know about Mister Finis to the right parties. But, for the present, I've decided to just chisel a little bit, from time to time. Now tonight, for instance, I believe that there is a grand band opening at the Tower Club. I could do with something to eat—and I might dance a little if I were urged. I'm not hinting, you understand, but—"

"I just had an idea, Sheba," he chuckled. "What do you say that we take in the Tower Club tonight?"

"I'd be thrilled, John. I'll bet you planned it all ahead of time—just as a little surprise for me."



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FIT GEM AND EVER-READY RAZORS

THREE-WAY DEATH

*The Jinx Was Death—
But Whizzer Figured
He Was Smart*

By BENTLEY
WILLIAMS

*Author of "Moon of Madness,"
"Murder Party," etc.*

WHIZZER CUPKIN stood in the night-shadowed doorway of the turreted, almost legendary Banbraugh place on upper Fifth Avenue, tensely gripping a blackjack in his right hand.

The door edged open. Old man Banbraugh, who dwelt alone, appeared; a stray moonbeam touched his bald, suspicious head.

"Well?" His voice had the petulant rasp of the stubbornly aged. "What is it?"

Whizzer, easing over so that his right hand would be hidden by the wall, gulped.

"I—I phoned you at five o'clock. Them goods—" He tapped his pocket. "They're here—"

"Je—Goods?" Old man Banbraugh hesitated, but avarice got the better of him. His bald head craned forward and he extended a skinny hand.

"You can't come in," he warned. "What've you got?"

"This!" Whizzer snarled.

Down crashed his sapper. A man appeared up the street. Whizzer faded into the doorway, found a length of chain barring entrance. Whimpering now from tension, his hand groped and wavered, finally unshipped the catch. He wriggled in.



Down crashed the sapper

In a moment he reappeared, breathed a low guarded whistle. From across the street the man approached, ran up the steps.

"That old guy's got a skull like paper, Max," Whizzer told him spitefully. "I conked him once and he's horse meat already."

"Yeah?" Max Stope was instantly apprehensive. "Garsh, we—"

"Save it! We're in and we're still alive, ain't we? They said it couldn't be done—well—we did it and it was soft!"

He had maintained that all along. Through all the years he'd heard the underworld talk covetously of old man Banbraugh's fabulous jewel collection, and Whizzer Cupkin had figured the job a soft one. Not even talk about the jinx that protected old man Banbraugh's jewels made him think anything else.

Whizzer knew that what the underworld called the "jinx" was really the astounding effectiveness of the

old man's self-invented burglar-resisting devices. Four times had crooks tried to buck that "jinx." And three times they came out of the Banbraugh place—dead. The fourth crook died too—a victim of Patrolman Delahanty's Irish eye. Of course, the gun in Delahanty's fist had a part in it, too.

And so, because he believed in a formula of strategy and brains, Whizzer Cupkin was now standing in the supposedly impenetrable Banbraugh mansion. The quality of his strategy was represented by his early phone conversation with the old man when he described some jeweled pieces that brought a note of eagerness into the old collector's voice. An appointment resulted.

As for brains—Whizzer believed he had used plenty in persuading Max Stope, pete man, to come and open the safe. Whizzer wanted no part of that risky job.

It was not brains, according to Whizzer's definition, that caused him to approach the house when Delahanty was at the end of his beat. That was just common sense. Max Stope touched Whizzer's arm.

"What are we waitin' fer?" he asked.

Whizzer stooped and grabbed at old man Banbraugh's body.

"We're not," he said, "Gimme a lift with this."

Together they carted the body through the hall lobby into the dining room adjoining.

"Snap it up," Whizzer directed.

He released the corpse, gazed around at the wood paneling that extended halfway up the walls; the dark walnut furniture; the oils of varying sizes that hung about. The largest, a full length portrait, flanked the right side of the mantel. He crossed over and scrutinized the drawn shades.

Max Stope, after extracting several articles from his pocket and laying them on the table, began an expert inspection of the woodwork.

Silence hung over the room for a time while Stope investigated. Whizzer sat in one of the walnut chairs,

his bright eyes watching every move. Stope finished up the paneling and shook his head. Then he began looking behind the pictures, came finally to the large portrait. At his touch it began to swing away easily when—

There was a sudden blinding light. Stope yelled, leaped back in fright. Acrid smoke swirled about.

"Easy, Max!" Whizzer slid forward, reassuring.

"It's a flash!" he guessed. "Must be a camera planted, but we'll find it. It's nothing, Max."

"Yeah?" Stope was nervous, defiant. "That's what you say, but—"

"Bah, keep quiet!" Whizzer snarled. "I'll fix it—you stay put!"

In swift, unflinching strides he pushed into the back of the house and down into the basement. At once a purring sound met his ears. He crew out his flash, walked over to a small, locked iron door. He sniffed; the area was strong with the stink of a battery repair shop. And the sound came from behind the door. He frowned dubiously.

At length he turned to a search for the switch box. On finding it, one sweep of his arm and he threw off the current. The purring stopped. Eyeing the small door as he walked past, Whizzer walked slowly up the steps, his thoughts churning.

IN the dining room, Max Stope was juggling a torch of his own.

"Turned the juice off, hey?" he asked.

"Right. No more stunts now. I guess the can must be behind that picture. Crack it—then we'll hunt up that negative."

"Yeah?" Stope's face was a muddy blob.

After a pause Stope scooped tools from the table, moved over to the portrait and began work. Whizzer expelled a soft sigh and slipped his sapper away. In that darkness he'd found it hard to tell whether Stope would need persuading to start work.

Again the room was silent save for the pete man's tinkering with the safe.

"Okay," he said finally.

The two crooks rushed to the hall, closed the sliding door behind them and waited. Whizzer was sweating now. His sensational coup was ruined if the charge were too big, too loud.

The solid walls blanketed the noise well. Stope's voice held a note of pride.

"Not so dusty, huh?" he queried.

"Skip it," Whizzer grated. "Grab the stuff fast!"

His own elation he choked off. Stope made straight for the safe, shook his head.

"Lucky I brought a claw along." He laid down his flash, picked up a compact jack.

"Swell." Whizzer, in whose mind an idea was working, said it from the doorway.

In a trice Stope had the jack adjusted and at work.

Whizzer was still over by the door when the jack finished its work. As Stope laid it down and put a hand on the safe, he was still there. It was from that spot he heard the gun blast, saw the pete man's torch fall, heard his groan as he crashed to the floor.

After that he sprang forward and played his own flash over Stope's body and gazed at the reddening hole in the crook's chest. Drawing his gloves on tighter, he chuckled understandingly. Something that had bothered him since his trip to the basement was very, very clear now.

Old man Banbraugh had been shrewd enough to wire his little devices to two circuits. Anticipating that some smart crook might crash the place and have the wit to throw off the house current, he had arranged uninterrupted protection by installing storage batteries!

Whizzer's eyes glistened appreciatively. If he hadn't happened to be cracking the joint at a time when the batteries were being recharged he wouldn't have known what the hell to think—might have fled in panic! But now it was soft!

He peered into the safe, past the gun wired to the side and let his glance rest avidly on rows of jewel cases. Swiftly he scooped them up,

After finishing he stepped back, searching the back of the swinging portrait and the recess for a camera. Sliding his hand over a confined, shadowed indentation in the wall, he found it—flashlight bulb and miniature Kodak with battery attachment. Deftly he released the negative and pocketed it, a relieved grin on his face. "That's that," he murmured. But there was one more thing—

FROM his pocket he whipped the sapper and faced old man Banbraugh's body. "Meet your murderer!" he jeered, bowing ironically. And placed the blackjack in one of Stope's hands for a moment, then put it in the fallen pete man's pocket. His light showed him blood flecks on the wounded man's mouth. It looked like the end for Stope. But if it wasn't, he would find himself tied to the murder! Whizzer's lip curled. Jinx house, huh? Swiftly he scurried through the hall.

Before opening the front door, however, he was prudent enough to glance through its small, heart-shaped glass. What he saw out there made his heart turn over. Copper's uniform! Delahanty!

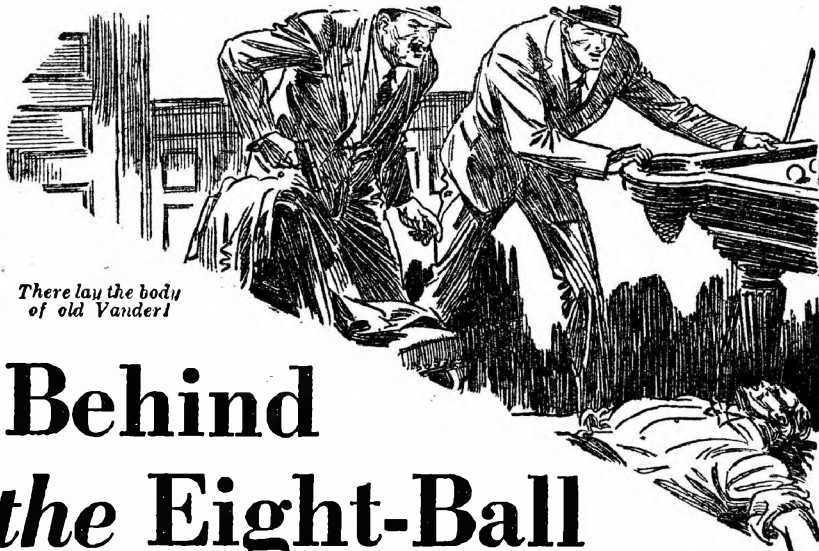
On the verge of going to pieces, Whizzer braced himself. The thing to do, he told himself savagely, was to sit tight; give Delahanty time enough to move along. He did think fleetingly of using another exit, but that was out; all exits were barred tight. No, old man Banbraugh had fixed it so that all traffic had to go through that front door.

It wasn't hard waiting. He even reflected patronizingly on the effectiveness of old man Banbraugh's electric apparatus that had cut Max Stope down. But where the old man had slipped was in failing to figure there might be a Whizzer Cupkin to step in and carry off the loot!

He glanced out again, chuckled exultantly. There wasn't even an officer Delahanty around to put on his shooting act. He placed a sticky hand on the knob, began to pull.

(Concluded on page 81.)

Tim McGuire Takes to Billiards and Puts the English on when Tackling a Double Murder Mystery!



*There lay the body
of old Vander!*

Behind the Eight-Ball

By RAY CUMMINGS

Author of "Fatal Timepiece," "Ghost Letter," etc.

TIM MCGUIRE strolled into the room, waved to the heavy-set police sergeant.

"Hello Tim," Sergeant Blaine greeted him. "You got here quick."

"Greased lightning, that's me."

Timothy McGuire was a small, red-headed, pugnacious fellow in his twenties. His cap was pulled low over his forehead, a white ascot linen stock with a diamond horse-shoe pin encircled his throat; a cigarette dangled from his lips. He looked more like a jockey or a race-track tipster than a detective. He was a member of the newly established Scientific Bureau of Crime Detection in Carterville, a neighboring city. Blaine considered him a smart young fellow, liked him personally, and had great faith in his ability.

So now Sergeant Blaine had sent for McGuire to help with a

case in which already he was baffled.

"Made any headway since you phoned me, Sarge?"

"No," Blaine admitted. "The murderer's gone. His name is Alan Vander—"

McGuire stared. "A murder mystery, an' he tells me the name of the murderer!" He grinned and gazed about the room.

"Adopted son of the murdered man," Blaine added. "Hit him in the head with some blunt instrument while they were playin' pool—in the private billiard room in the basement."

"Swell-lookin' dump here," McGuire commented. "Bet they got a raft of servants."

"Five," Blaine said. "All of 'em in a wing of the top floor. Not a damn one seems to know anything about the murder. I got them all

in a room up there under guard, if you want to question them."

"How many in the family, Sarge?"

"Three, not counting the escaped murderer. He scrambled on foot, evidently. I got the net out for him—we'll pick him up by daybreak."

"Fine," McGuire agreed. "Then why shouldn't I go home?"

"Well," Blaine said lugubriously, "this Alan Vander beat it—so I guess he's guilty."

"Which proves nothing, you mean? Am I right, Sarge?"

"Yes," Blaine agreed. "Look here, Tim, I'm in a tough spot. This old geyser that got bumped off—he's rich—and about the most popular and influential man in town. What's worse, he's been givin' a bunch of money to our Anti-Vice Society."

Blaine mopped his reddish bald-spot as he thought of it. "I got to solve this thing in a hurry, get me? The Anti-Vicers are just sittin' like spiders waitin' to prove we're rotten cops. The boss, he says to me—'Get me the murderer, Blaine—or anyways, arrest somebody. An' do it in a hurry!' Fire was in his eyes, Tim. An' my job ain't worth a plugged nickel—"

"The murderer," McGuire said, "will be yours in less'n no time. Tell me more."

"Well, the boss, he says this Anti-Vice racket—"

"Hell, Sarge, I don't mean more of your troubles. You'll be this burg's prize number one sleuth after tonight—if we have any luck. Trust me. Besides, you've told me the name of the murderer—"

Blaine smiled ruefully. "But that's the trouble. I got no evidence. There's some damn queer points to this thing. The three members of the family—one's a sick woman—another's a sick man—another's a man who's pretty damn drunk. Two people sick an' one drunk!"

"That's a queer layout. What's the drunk's name?"

"Robert Plotz. He's twin brother to the murdered man's young wife. He says—and she does too—that he was in bed, sleepin' off the jag.

Maybe he was, I'm damned if I know. The woman, an' the other man—he's Peter Rance, the corpse's nephew—they both got influenza. Both in bed with fever. The woman went downstairs an' discovered the murder—"

"While she was sick in bed, Sarge?"

"I'm tellin' you it's queer," Blaine agreed. "The billiard room's in the basement. She says she smelled gas. She went downstairs to investigate. Even the gas in this house is queer. Not regular gas. They got their own plant. Acetylene gas. Anyway, I was hopin' you might turn up some evidence, so when I nab this Alan Vander—"

McGuire rubbed his hands. "A hound on a trail—that's me. Come on, let's go."

IT was nearly midnight—a raw, chilly night of September. The old fashioned twenty-room country mansion of George J. Vander, aged, wealthy philanthropist, was blazing with lights.

Sergeant Blaine and McGuire went inside. They traversed a big baronial hall, entered a dim spacious library, where on a davenport before a log fire the three members of the murdered man's family were sitting.

McGuire, when the greetings were over, stood on the hearth with his back to the fire. He had flung his hat to a nearby chair, and stood rocking on his heels with his hands deep in his pockets. The firelight behind him painted the three people on the davenport with its red-yellow glow.

"Mrs. Greta Vander?" McGuire said. "Pleased to meet you. Tell me what happened. Just spill it in your own way."

The widow of the murdered man was a plump little woman of thirty; exceedingly pretty; a blonde-hair baby-doll type, with blue-eyes and a rosebud mouth. A German-American, she had been an actress—Greta Plotz—when, a year ago, she had married the rich old man Van-

der. She sat now staring at McGuire. She was wearing a frilly, lacy negligee over a pink silk night-robe. Her face was flushed and her eyes bright with fever. Her whole manner was vaguely defiant, sullen. But there was something pathetic about her as well. The shock of her husband's death. Her own illness. Yet it seemed more than that. Some desperate terror which she was striving to hide.

"At about ten o'clock tonight I was in bed. I'm not well. Influenza—" she said, slowly.

"You look it," McGuire said. "You ought to be in bed now. I'll be quick. Where is your bedroom—what floor?"

"The second. One flight up."

"Who else was up there?"

The man beside her said, "I was—in my bedroom across the hall."

This was Peter Rance, the murdered man's nephew—a man of perhaps forty—tall, thin, delicate-looking—with sparse blond hair. He was wearing a dressing gown over his pajamas. He added with a lugubrious smile:

"I've got the confounded influenza too. This damnably dank house—"

McGuire nodded. "Rotten luck. You look sick—"

"The doc examined them both a little while ago," Blaine put in.

"To see if they're faking?" McGuire said with disconcerting frankness. "They sure look sick—"

"Both got a fever," Blaine added. "About a hundred right now—no argument on that."

"I was in bed," Peter Rance added. "Robert came home about a quarter of ten—Greta and I both got up to see him. He was pretty well intoxicated—"

"That's you?" McGuire said to the man beside Peter Rance—a big, handsome, dark-haired, powerful fellow, fully dressed in disheveled evening clothes.

"Yes. That's me," Robert Plotz said. His face was flushed, his eyes red-rimmed. He sat with a hand holding his head.

"You're the drunk," McGuire said.

"I heard about you. Got sober in a hurry, didn't you?"

Big Robert Plotz was the young widow's brother. However drunk he may have been, it was past now. He smiled. "That's true," he said. "I guess I'm all right now. They put me on my bed when I came in at quarter of ten. I can't remember much about it—I went right to sleep."

"Can't remember hitting a guy on the head by any chance?"

PLOTZ stared with a sullen flush. "Say, what's the idea? Are you accusing—"

"I always accuse everybody," McGuire grinned. "What's that dried blood doing on your forehead? Looks recent."

"I must have bumped myself," Plotz said. "I guess I was pretty unsteady."

"An' you don't remember just when? Oh well, drunks are like that."

"I—I don't like your talk, young man," Greta Vander said abruptly. She seemed trying to be aggressive, but she only looked terrorized. "My brother isn't a drunk and he isn't a murderer—"

"Maybe not—maybe not," McGuire said hastily. "I don't want to make you mad, Mrs. Vander. Let's get this straight. At ten o'clock you were sick in bed. So was Peter Rance here. And your brother, Mr. Plotz—he was up there in another bedroom—er—inebriated and asleep. So far so good. Who else besides the servants was in the house?"

"Old Vander an' his adopted son," Blaine said. "They was playin' pool in the basement billiard room. Like I told you, the old man got hit in the head with something heavy—and Alan Vander beat it—"

"So he's the murderer," McGuire said. "Maybe. He ain't hiding around here anywhere, by any chance?"

"If he is he's a good hider," Blaine said. "We've searched. He's guilty—of something, anyway."

"Complicity," McGuire said, "or maybe he's a vanishing witness."

Maybe one of these three we got here is guilty—”

“You like to joke, don't you?” Peter Rance, the nephew, said abruptly. “Seems like bad taste at a tragic time like this. Maybe I'm wrong. I feel rotten—I don't feel like jokes.”

“It's only my peculiar style,” McGuire said. “Don't mind me—I'm an outspoken guy.”

“You haven't accused me yet,” Rance added resentfully. “You might—”

“Don't worry. I will if you give me time. I wish I knew where Mr. Plotz was when he bumped himself.”

“It seems to me you're full of a lot of wild theories,” Peter Rance commented sourly.

“Who's running this thing?” McGuire retorted with a snap. “I'm the detective, not you.” And then he grinned. “Having theories is my business—I'll follow all the wild ones I can think of, till I hit one that isn't wild. Here's another—if you're interested—Mrs. Vander here gets up from a sick bed all of a sudden and goes down through a cold house and discovers a murder. What took her down? I was just guessing she might have heard her drunken brother downstairs—”

The chance thrust struck home. The young widow gasped involuntarily; and Robert Plotz, despite his obvious effort, looked frightened. It was so apparent that Sergeant Blaine ejaculated. “Well, I'm damned, I never thought of that. See here, Mrs. Vander—you didn't tell me—”

“You probably didn't ask her,” McGuire said. “Tell us the truth now, Mrs. Vander.”

The woman was struggling to recover her poise. “That's silly. Robert was asleep on his bed upstairs. I smelled gas—”

“This acetylene gas?”

“Yes. The village gas lines don't come out this far, so we have our own generator in the cellar. I thought there was a leak—”

McGuire nodded. “You can't miss the smell of acetylene. I smelled it

when I first came into this house. Then what, Mrs. Vander?”

“I—I went down,” she said. “To get to the cellar, you have to pass the billiard room, and—”

“Wait a minute. Why didn't you give a buzz for a servant?”

“I—I don't know. They were all upstairs—”

“Or call Peter Rance! He was right on the same hall with you?”

“Yes. He was there. I spoke to him, but I—I didn't tell him where I was going. I went downstairs. The billiard room door was open. I saw—saw my husband lying there—”

“And Alan was gone? You're sure of that? You didn't meet him and advise him to beat it, by any chance?”

“No,” she said. “He wasn't there. I ran back upstairs. I was screaming. Peter came running out of his bedroom—”

“And your brother?”

“He was asleep. He didn't wake up.”

“They phoned for me,” Blaine said. “Plotz was still asleep when I found him.”

“Well,” McGuire said abruptly, “that's the story. You people all ought to be in bed—I won't keep you much longer. Let's take a look at the corpse, Sarge.”

THE woman and the two men on the davenport stared in silent confusion as McGuire, hands deep in his pockets, sauntered out. With Sergeant Blaine leading they went back along the Baronial Hall to where a rear stairway led down into the basement.

“I'm wondering about the murder motive, Sarge,” McGuire was saying.

“The old man was rich,” Blaine commented. “This Alan Vander who ran away—adopted son—he's one of the heirs.”

“And so's everybody else, I'm guessing.”

“Well, yes,” Blaine admitted.

“Nephew Peter Rance—an heir. The woman, now a rich young

widow, and Plotz, her brother. That gives them the same motive. Let's say she's shielding her brother. Matter of fact, all three of 'em might be in it together." They reached a dim basement hall at the foot of the steep back stairs. McGuire abruptly stood sniffing.

"What's the idea?" Blaine demanded.

"My nose seems workin' overtime on this case, Sarge. Most of the clues seem to be smells."

Blaine stared. "Clues? That's the hell of it. I haven't turned up a damned clue. It's all wild theory."

"A smell of acetylene gas," McGuire said. He looked puzzled. "It's acetylene all right. I guess it comes from the cellar."

It was a faint but pungent smell, and it seemed stronger here in the basement. McGuire stood puzzled; pondering, and he rubbed his nose vigorously with the back of his hand.

"Say," Blaine ejaculated. "you ain't a dog—"

"Hound on a trail—that's me, Sarge. Another smell here—right here in the hall. Can't you smell it yourself? Whiskey!"

UP against the base-board of the narrow hallway they found a few broken pieces of a flask which made the smell of whiskey obvious.

"Well, I'm damned," murmured the crestfallen Blaine. "How in the devil could I be expected to search this big house for—"

McGuire was triumphant. "Guess we can dope out some of the truth, Sarge. Plotz had a flask. He fell here, smashed the flask, and bumped his forehead at the same time. His sister took the broken glass out of his pocket, and then took him upstairs. Naturally she was afraid to tell he was down here. Maybe Peter Rance knows it too— My Gawd, up there in the library, Sarge, didn't you smell the whiskey on the drunk's clothes? Even a perpetual souse would hardly smell like that. Where's the billiard room, Sarge?"

It was close at hand. For a mo-

ment, in its doorway, McGuire stood peering. It was a big, square, low-ceilinged, windowless room. The pool table dominated its center. Around the sides were a few small chairs. On one wall the wooden ball rack, cue rack and a slate scoreboard were fastened.

Mute tragic scene. On the floor near one end of the pool table, lay the body of old Vander—a small, thin-framed, but handsome man of perhaps seventy; grey-haired, smooth-shaven. He wore dark dinner trousers, dress shirt, with sleeves rolled up. An aristocrat, stricken in the midst of play. A wound just above his temple showed where some heavy missile had struck and fractured his skull.

A pool game, terminating in murder. The abruptness of it was obvious. On a chair lay the murdered man's Tuxedo jacket and vest. The cue with which he had been playing had fallen to the floor beside him. And the other player's cue was here, sloping against the table.

"Somehow, I think that fellow Alan Vander—" Blaine was saying.

"Aw shut up, Sarge—I'm tryin' to dope this out." Then McGuire grinned. "I'm a pool shark myself. A game was goin' on here—I want to figure the dope on it."

Game of pool terminating in murder. The pool balls were scattered over the table, with the white cue ball near the center. A few were in the pockets; none were in the rack.

Like a hound on a trail, McGuire moved around the room.

"They were playin' rotation pool, Sarge. Should have racked the balls—I wish they had. Six balls pocketed. See 'em here? One to six. The seven ball was the next play."

The seven ball was almost in front of one of the side pockets. From the cue ball's position, it would have been an easy shot. McGuire took a stance where the player would have been. And suddenly he exclaimed. "Where's the eight ball?"

The eight ball was missing! "I got it, Sarge! The murderer threw the eight ball! That's what hit the old man on the head an' killed him! The victim couldn't have been standing here, Sarge. If he was here, he wouldn't have fallen 'way over there."

Blaine saw the point. "You mean the murderer was standing about where you are? An' grabbed the eight ball, and threw it?"

"Yeah. Guess so. The murderer was gettin' ready to drop the seven ball. An argument started. The eight ball must have been here on the table beside him—and he picked it up an' hurled it. The man behind the eight ball!" McGuire chuckled grimly. "That's where a murderer belongs, Sarge. We'll get him! I just got a hunch we'll get him quick now!"

BLAINE was doing some thinking on his own account. "If the murderer flung the ball from where you're standing now," he said, "how come his cue is on the opposite side the table?"

McGuire nodded. "Good work. You're gettin' the idea. And both cues are chalked with green chalk. Here's an old piece of white chalk over there in the rack. The green table felt is marked with scuffs of white chalk. I like green chalk better myself. It's neater—"

"What's all that mean?" Blaine demanded.

"Nothin' except that tonight they were using green chalk, looks like for the first time. An' there's the box of chalk."

It lay on a side table—a small cardboard box of the little cubes of green chalk, each paper-wrapped with a cup-like depression in the top.

"A full box—a new box," McGuire said. "Just one piece gone—just the piece they were using. Old Vander evidently just got this green chalk—just started using it."

The lone piece, in use, lay on the edge of the pool table. McGuire now was at the wall-rack of cues—

taking them down one by one, examining their tips.

"All of 'em have fingerprints," Blaine said. "All the family play with those cues every day—prints on 'em don't mean a thing—"

McGuire again was pondering. "Sarge, you go get your suspects. Bring 'em down here. There are a few queer things about this game of pool—I want to see what they say when I tell 'em." He shoved at the bulky Blaine. "Hey, don't stand like a dumbbell. I'll meet you here. I'm going to the cellar an' take a look around. An' listen—put overcoats on those two sick people. We don't want to give 'em pneumonia."

Blaine went upstairs. He was back in a few minutes, bringing down the three suspects from the library. In the lower hall, just outside the billiard room door, they gathered, waiting for McGuire. All three bore expressions of puzzled, frightened wonderment. Robert Plotz was shaky and pale now; the feverish woman and the sick Peter Rance, wrapped in overcoats, nevertheless were shivering.

Then from the cellar, McGuire appeared—a changed McGuire, his face grim and set, his eyes gleaming.

"I found the gas-leak, Sarge. My Gawd, I sure didn't expect what I found. Come on, you people—"

"Oh—" murmured the woman, "do I—have to go in there? Is he—still lying there?"

"We're not going in there, mam," McGuire said. "Just little evidence in the cellar I want to show you. More important than the billiard room. Won't take a minute—"

Silent, wondering, expectant little procession. McGuire led them to a nearby door, where stairs led down into the now lighted cellar. The smell of escaping acetylene gas was plainer here. To one side the big generator was visible.

"What in the devil," Plotz suddenly burst out. "What's the idea of this?"

"Acetylene gas," McGuire said

grimly. "It's hydrogen and carbon. When lighted, it combines with oxygen from the air. You generate it from calcium carbide—that's CaC. It's dark, lumpy stuff, looks something like soft coal. You put water in the generator. It drips slowly on the carbide. Instantly there is a chemical reaction. The carbide fizzes. Acetylene gas is released, and slaked lime sludge is left."

"And what of it?" Peter Rance demanded. "Is this a lesson in chemistry?"

"Damned if it isn't," McGuire said. He shoved suddenly at Mrs. Vander. "You stay back, mam—no need for you to see this."

Abruptly he drew the others forward. Near the generator there was a bin, in which several huge four-foot metal containers of carbide were stored. Some were full, unopened. Others were empty. McGuire stood over one—a broad, squat cylindrical metal barrel.

"Sarge, listen—in the billiard room just now," McGuire said, "I learned a few things. You been figurin' two people played that game of pool. That's wrong. There was three players. The old man, and Alan Vander—and somebody else! The man behind the eight ball! How do I know there were three players? The green chalk, Sarge! A third cue, with the tip chalked green, is in the rack! You noticed that the cue against the table was on the wrong side. Sure it was! That was Alan Vander's! The man behind the eight ball—after the murder he put the third cue back in the rack, so it wouldn't look like three players. He wasn't afraid of fingerprints. But he forgot that the tip was chalked green!"

In the sudden tense silence of the cellar, McGuire with an iron poker began prying up the lid of the metal carbide cylinder. "And," he added grimly. "Here's where the smell of leaking acetylene gas comes from. Smell it now! I'm tellin' you, stand back mam—you don't want to see this!"

The shivering, terrified woman moved back as the lid flew off. Gruesome, horrible sight indeed! A blood-soaked man's body was stuffed in here—a smallish, thin young fellow in grey business clothes. A knife was buried to its hilt in his chest. His shirt was solid crimson.

McGUIRE'S voice was a low, swift growl, mingled with the murmurs of horror from the peering men. "About a foot of pure carbide was in the bottom of this container. An' I guess this poor feller wasn't quite dead when the murderer stuffed him in here. His heart was still pumping blood out of that wound. An' the blood soaked down onto the carbide. Damned gruesome chemistry. Your vanishing witness, Sarge. Alan Vander—"

"Alan!" the young widow gasped. "Alan—murdered too?"

"Sorry mam, but it's true. That was the gas leak you smelled—"

She gasped, "I did smell it. But I didn't come down for that, I—I heard Robert come in. He— He—"

"He went down to the basement an' fell—and yelled, I guess, didn't he, man?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I brought him up—Peter and I put him to bed. Then I got wondering why Alan and my husband hadn't come out of the billiard room at the noise my brother made. I went down again—"

"And discovered the murder," McGuire finished. "Quite right, mam. Then you got scared for fear your brother might have done it. He didn't, mam. The murderer was feverish an' sick—but not too sick to come down in his pajamas an' start a game of pool—an' murder two men.

"It won't be hard to prove exactly who he is. When he hid the body, he hid the knife too. And the eight ball—it's right here, with the body. He didn't bother to wear gloves. He never thought the knife and the ball would come to light, with his fingerprints on them. Oh they'll be there, all right, but we

don't need 'em to know who he is! Look at this! Strands from the tassel of his dressing gown rope! The tasseled rope hung down into this barrel—an' when he jammed the cover on it, it got caught so that he jerked off a few strands of the tassel when he beat it! Take a look at him now—he's still got the dressing gown on. Look at that tassel—you can see where these threads match up!"

Peter Rance might have made a bolt, but McGuire with a leap had a strangle hold on him so that Rance yielded and stood sullen.

Robert Plotz gasped. "So he did it! Why—you damned murderer—and I can tell you why he did it, Mr. McGuire. My—my sister—it's her nature to flirt. This damned conceited fellow—he took her seriously. He thought she was in love with him! Alan got wise to it. Alan told me he and Rance had a fight about it—just this afternoon—I guess he killed Alan for revenge—"

"To marry a rich and lovely widow," McGuire said, "he killed her husband. But it was carefully planned. He also wanted revenge

on Alan, but I guess it was a lot more than that. You had the whole thing doped out well ahead, didn't you, Rance? A little attack of influenza couldn't stop you. A double murder, so Alan would vanish an' we'd always think he was the escaped murderer. Pretty slick plan! George Plotz was out—guess you didn't expect him home 'til late. His sister sick in bed upstairs. Easy for you to arrange a game of billiards, hit the old man with a billiard ball and stab Alan before he had a chance to do anything. This carbide barrel—you figured you could get rid of that tomorrow without any trouble? But you forgot that acetylene gas would be generated and give away the hiding place to us hound-dogs. Am I right, Rance?"

"You go to hell," Rance growled sullenly.

"Don't want to talk, eh?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, you don't have to. Juries are sometimes pretty dumb, but they'll never be one dumb enough to turn you loose. We got you right behind the eight ball. Am I right, Sarge?"

THREE-WAY DEATH

(Concluded from page 73)

Gently, ever so gently, he drew back the door until—

Gun crashes spat from opposite sides of the vestibule. Whizzer, slugged in vital spots, screamed, slumped. He whimpered, felt drowned; there was a pain—

And then along with that pain a

cloudy feeling came over Whizzer Cupkin. A feeling that in placing guns in the vestibule to fire automatically if the safe were feloniously opened—that maybe—maybe old man Banbraugh had figured a Whizzer Cupkin might step in to carry off the loot. Whizzer sighed and died.

THE LADDER TO DEATH

An Action-Packed Crime Novelette

By PAUL ERNST

—in Next Month's Issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE

A Novelette of Magic and Murder



"They've killed him—just as they

The Dead Speak

CHAPTER I

NECKLACE OF DEATH

AT quarter past ten, the little black coupé turned off Highway 57, followed a graveled road for perhaps a quarter of a mile. A gradual easing of the accelerator and a sharp jerk at the wheel sent the car off the edge of the road into the brush. Leaves and bushes whispered against the shiny black metal. A brake squeaked. Cautiously the door opened and Nick Preston—Nicolai Prestino, world-famed magician—climbed out, cursed softly as a briar made a tearing grab at the trouser-leg of

his blue serge suit, and turned down the road.

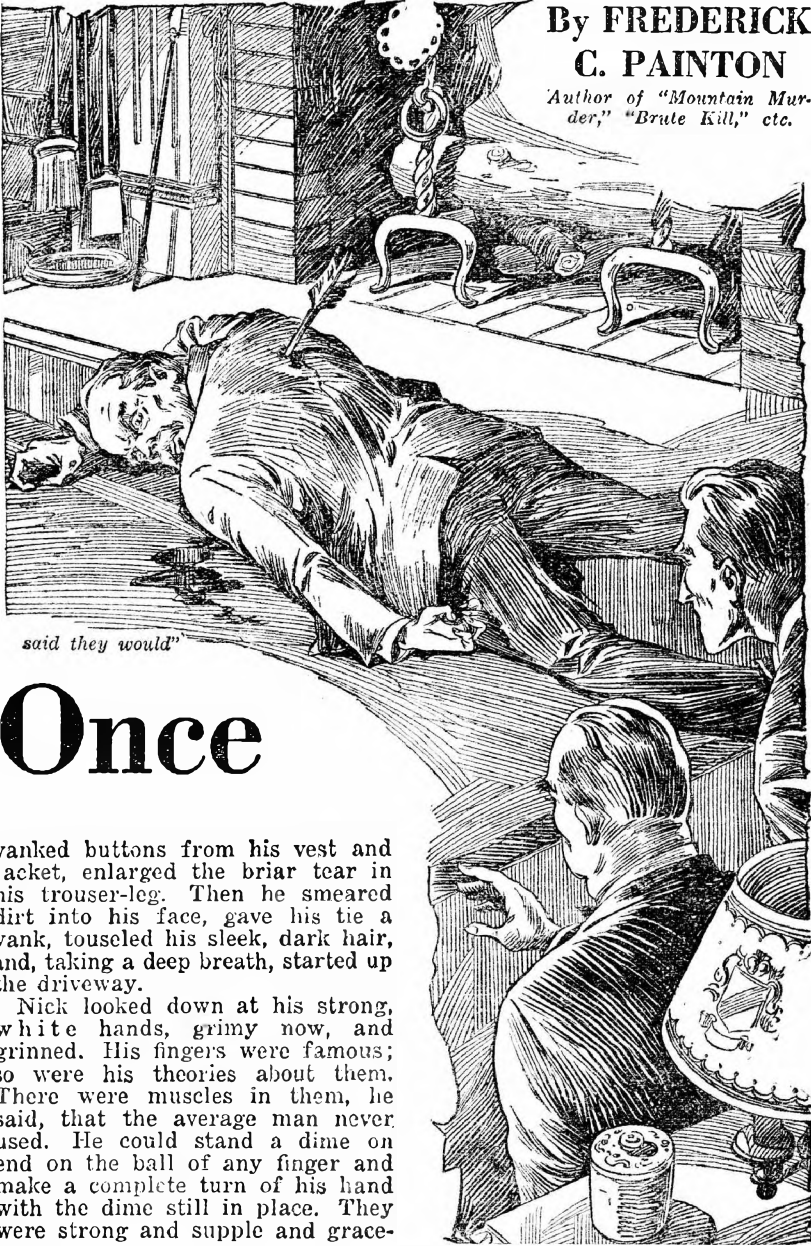
He came to the stone portals of the Anton Mayville estate. Through a screen of mathematically trimmed shrubs, he could see the massive outlines of the staid old house. There were lights in the lower windows, and in some of the upstairs rooms.

Nick stopped, a slim, strong shadow pressed against the black bulk of one of the high stone posts to which was swung the iron gate. With those strong, slender fingers that never failed to attract attention, he carefully tore at his clothing—ripped the white linen shirt,

From the Beyond, the Voice of

By **FREDERICK
C. PAINTON**

Author of "Mountain Murder," "Brute Kill," etc.



said they would"

Once

yanked buttons from his vest and jacket, enlarged the briar tear in his trouser-leg. Then he smeared dirt into his face, gave his tie a yank, tousled his sleek, dark hair, and, taking a deep breath, started up the driveway.

Nick looked down at his strong, white hands, grimy now, and grinned. His fingers were famous; so were his theories about them. There were muscles in them, he said, that the average man never used. He could stand a dime on end on the ball of any finger and make a complete turn of his hand with the dime still in place. They were strong and supple and grace-

Death Calls to Doom a Murderer!

ful, those fingers, as sensitive as any safe-cracker's, as powerful and intuitive as any pianist's.

As he walked up the driveway to the house, his quick thoughts were obsessed with a half-million dollar string of blue diamonds that the Federal customs authorities were convinced was in Mayville's possession. Spotting that necklace in Mayville's house meant two thousand dollars to Nick Preston. A matter of a wager.

THE Peterhoff diamonds—scintillant, wickedly flashing, the eyes of a hundred serpents sparkled venomously in their blue fire, eyes of evil and murder. For years, a trail of blood had dripped in their wake.

A smuggler died in the arms of Inspector Dave Dunning of the Treasury squad—died, babbling a story of murder and swearing that he had sold the stones to Anton Mayville. Dunning believed him—but Mayville's tremendous fortune, his unassailable position made the actual proof of the dead smuggler's story a matter of vicious complexity.

"Hell, Nick," Dunning had said, "we can't third degree the old boy much as I, personally, would enjoy it. And even our cleverest men can't worm into the house under cover. But, man, how I'd love to nail that old pirate. It's the first case I ever flopped on."

Nick had smiled.

"As an amateur magician, you should be able to locate those stones. He must have a vault in his house somewhere and if he does, I—" He hesitated.

"You could what?" Dunning challenged.

"I think I could spot it," the magician answered softly, his eyes lighting the way a fisherman's will when one of his cronies is describing the big trout that can't be caught.

Dunning exploded. After all, his best men had been laboring on the case for months and now this—this magician—

"I'll bet you a thousand," he ex-

ploded, "you can't find the vault—let alone the necklace. You couldn't even get into the house to search for it. And forget about hiring out as a third footman. Mayville's had two servants—has had 'em for years, and he's too stingy or too scared to take on any more—even to keep that old mausoleum of his in order."

"You're sure it's there—in the Westchester place?"

"A thousand says it is and says you can't get your hands on it. I'll give you a month. And bet you another thousand you made a bad bet."

Nick grinned openly. "I'll take that too. I've got twenty-nine days before I sail to fill that engagement at the London Palladium. Should be plenty of time."

"No help, mind you. This is to be a Prestino solo."

"Tonna?" Tonna was his assistant.

"All right. Tonna."

That had been a week ago. For seven days Nick had been doing a little intensive research on Mayville, his habits, disposition, and family. Now he was ready to go into action—or try to.

His finger pressed the bell. He waited. There were footsteps, hurried ones, female, high-heeled ones. Nick brightened.

The door was flung open. A tall slender girl stared, wide-eyed at him. She wore a grey traveling suit, and blonde hair glistened under a dark hat. Nick pushed through the door, fell back against it, breathing hard. The girl put her fingers against her mouth.

"You're—what happened?"

"My car—c r a s h e d—down the road—"

The hall was dimly lighted, and in the half-shadows Nick noticed two light traveling cases by the door, where the girl must have put them down. Before he could ask about them, somewhere from off to Nick's right, came a shrill, terrible cry, husky, wordless, and agonized.

The girl stiffened. Nick brushed by her, his curiosity acting like a

motor inside his body, mechanically driving him. He passed through a large, vault-like room, not too blindly to note the dusty, ramshackle furniture, the mouldy disorder, the room's figurative resemblance to the skeleton of something long dead.

Then he was through that one, and into a library.

The body of a man lay, face down, arms outspread, on the floor by the fireplace. The *corpse* of a man, Nick thought, as he saw, sticking out from the middle of the back, part of a feathered shaft, saw the wide-staring eyes of the side turned face—recognized Anton Mayville.

CHAPTER II

MURDER



VEN if Nick hadn't recognized the millionaire, the full-length portrait hanging above the mantel would have told him who it was. Nick looked from the picture on the wall to the dead face, and then to the scared, staring one of the third figure in the room, a young man, who bore a vague resemblance both to Mayville and to the girl, kneeling beside the body.

He looked up at Nick, questioning, then nodded, as if to himself. "You're Swenson," he said in a half-whisper. "You're Swenson but you've come too late."

So I'm Swenson, am I, Nick thought.

He was conscious of soft movement behind him. The girl. She gave a little cry, not exactly of surprise, certainly not of grief, perhaps of horror or bewilderment.

"They've killed him," she said. "Just as they said they would."

Nick didn't want to look at her yet. He was still studying the face of the young man kneeling. Then he decided. The young man wasn't pretending—he was genuinely surprised, horrified. The thing that confronted him was something he couldn't believe. Nick had an idea

that first reactions were important in helping to place guilt.

The boy was surprised. The girl was—bewildered? Very well. He could go on from there.

The girl was speaking again. "You're Swenson—my uncle sent for you. You came too late." She sounded almost glad of that. Then hastily she went on. "I'm Martha Mayville and that's Amory Blair, my cousin. Anton Mayville was our uncle. Amory, get off the floor. Get away from—him." She shuddered.

Then there was more movement by the door. Two men came in. One was short, roly-poly, with a terrace of chins banking down over a dinner jacket collar. The other was tall and swarthy. His face was hawklike. His eyes were dark, clear, direct.

The roly-poly one, according to Martha Mayville's introductions, was Mark Windry—"he sells my uncle smuggled stones," Martha said bluntly—and the other was Ali ibn Ben Sakr—"he came to sell my uncle a jewel."

Nick looked at the four of them. "Somebody bumped this guy," he said, trying to sound like Dunning in one of his tougher moods. "You're all under suspicion."

Sullen silence greeted his words. Nick thought fast. Since a detective had been sent for, he would arrive. Until he did, the assumption that he, Nick, was Swenson, would prove unlimited opportunities for helpful prowling. Nick didn't care much about the murder. That would keep for the police. He had a bet to win and a challenge to meet. He must hurry.

He knelt beside the corpse and touched the feathered shaft. "An arrow. Which of you is an archer?"

They were silent. The arrow was buried in the body up to its feathered end, but the tip had not come through. This was odd. A regulation twenty-four inch arrow should have stuck out through the chest.

Behind a chair to the left of the body, he found a crossbow, its winding screw of ancient, blackened, oiled iron. The thing sticking

nastily out of Mayville's back was no arrow but a crossbow bolt.

Nick glanced around the walls where hung antique weapons of all descriptions. It didn't take him long to spot the place where the crossbow had hung.

"This," he muttered, "is going to be a honey."

He touched the face and ankles and found them cooled but not yet clammy. One arm was stiffening in rigor mortis.

Then Nick began asking questions, asking them fast, in a clipped compelling staccato of fire that brought—or seemed to—surprisingly frank answers.

He found out that Mayville was jewel-mad. Not just fond of jewels—but insane about them. He loved them, loved to fondle and finger and gloat over them, to stroke their smooth, cool surfaces as another man might have caressed a woman.

With the possible exception of Martha, he had loved no one—and even to Martha he was sullen, mean, bitter. Even the girl admitted that. They all admitted, too, probably because it would have been of no purpose to deny it, that each of them had quarreled with the old man that night.

AMORY had been refused a request for part of his inheritance which he needed to start in business.

Wyndry was after twenty thousand dollars that he claimed was due him on a jewel deal.

Ali ibn Ben Sakr had demanded fifteen thousand dollars more in payment for a rose diamond—or the return of the stone.

Martha had wished her independence—she wanted to go to New York to dramatic school.

To all of them, Mayville had dealt out a ferocious, stubborn "No!"

"He said he'd cut me out of his will," Martha said, concluding her account. "Said he was going to change it so that neither Amory or I would get a penny. He screamed that at me as I came out of the

door. I could hear him still yelling it as I went upstairs to pack. That was at nine o'clock."

"Who saw him after that?" Nick demanded.

No one answered.

"Who saw Miss Mayville leave the study then?"

Young Amory stepped forward, eyes blazing. "You can drop that, Swenson," he said. "I was passing upstairs when Martha left uncle's study. I heard him yelling at her—yelling at her even after the door of her bedroom slammed."

"All right," Nick said, placatingly. "Let's go see the jewels. And who did you mean when you said 'they' killed him, Miss Mayville?"

The girl shrugged. "Uncle was always fighting with the jewel smugglers and thieves from whom he bought most of the stones in his collection. He never paid the prices he agreed to. They were always threatening him. It was the receipt of just such a threatening letter that made him send for you. I thought at first that they had—but how could they have gotten in and gotten away again without being seen? You were coming up the driveway just before the body was found."

"Mr. Swenson, the jewels can wait. Why don't you ask these people where they were after I left uncle—what they were doing?"

Nick fumed, inside. He didn't care who was where nor why. He wanted to get at the jewel collection. His fingers fairly itched.

"All right," he said, patiently. "Where were you?"

"Ali ibn Ben Sakh was in his room. So was Wyndry. Blair was in the garden. Nick didn't care."

"No alibis," he growled. He turned to Martha. "Show me where the jewels are. Maybe the murderer stole—"

The girl had a square sheet of typewritten paper in her hand. "Here's the note I told you about. The threatening letter. I thought you ought to see it."

Nick glared at her. Was she deliberately trying to— Her eyes,

which were bright and luminously blue, looked into his with trustful candor. But were there mocking devils behind them? He frowned.

He glanced at the unsigned note that said, "if the sixty grand isn't in a package at Grand Central Terminal on Tuesday, it means your neck. We're sick of fooling around. The dough or else."

Nick put the note down. "The main thing," he said, "is to discover if anything has been stolen from the collection."

"You're very persistent," she said. "Motives supply murderers."

By a rear staircase she led him down into the cellar. She switched on lights, led him by a huge furnace to a rear cellar wall made of apparently impregnable concrete blocks. She pressed something Nick did not see, and there was a click and part of the wall moved forward about an inch.

Martha hooked her fingers back of the crevice and swung wide a door six feet high by four in breadth, exposing the face of a modern, burglar-proof safe. Nick moved forward to give her a hand with the heavy, pivoting masonry.

"Never mind," she said. Her arms moved easily.

"You must be husky," he told her.

"I manage," was all she said. "I found the combination in Uncle Anton's desk. The new one. He'd just had it changed last week." Her fingers twirled the dials expertly. There were *whirrs* and clicks. "There you are," she said, smiling.

The door swung open. From a little tray she took a small bunch of keys which were to unlock the various compartments.

"There's an inventory somewhere," she explained. "I'll have to look for it if any jewels are missing. I only know the best of his pieces."

She paused, put down the keys, then added. "He never showed them to anyone else except once to Amory." She shuddered slightly. "The look in his eyes when he held them up to the light." As she said

that she turned a switch and an electric light bulb of a peculiar type, called sunlight rays, threw a bluish-grey incandescence over the scene.

"What would be the most valuable thing he had?" Nick asked carelessly.

"A string of matched diamonds. In this drawer here—that plush case."

Nick's left hand went toward the drawer in question, opened the black velvet box. He stared.

"Hell!" he exclaimed bitterly.

She came forward, peered inside and gasped. "Why, they're gone!"

"Exactly!" growled Nick.

This damned murder and theft had cost him two thousand dollars!

CHAPTER III

ON THE TRAIL



He felt the girl's eyes on him. "The necklace is gone—and so is a rose diamond."

Their glances met. "Ali ibn Ben Sakr!" she exclaimed.

"Maybe," shrugged Nick. "But a missing diamond is not proof of murder."

"No, but it's your lead," she cried eagerly—too eagerly, Nick thought.

"Who was interested in that necklace—Ali ibn Ben Sakr?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. They were blue diamonds, easily cut up for resale. Anybody interested in money would want them."

Nick suppressed a sigh. He was getting nowhere fast. Should he summon the police and leave, kissing his two thousand dollars goodbye? Or should he seize what time remained, find the killer and substitute the imitation necklace he'd brought along and vanish, leaving the rest to the police? Nick's teeth clicked. He was stubborn and his decisions were made instantly.

Reaching the hallway that led to the front of the house, Martha said, "What next?"

"The servants," rejoined Nick.

She went to the butler's pantry

and presently an old man, as lean and withered as a dried apple, came.

"This is Blake," Martha said. "Blake, Mr. Swenson is a detective looking into Uncle Anton's murder. Answer his questions."

"I don't know a thing," whined the old man. "Margaret was sick all day and I ain't never left her only at supper time when I served you." He stared resentfully. "I ought to be with her now."

"Did you hear or see anything unusual tonight?" Nick asked.

"Nothing, only about quarter after nine I took Mr. Mayville his milk and he asked if the detective had come yet and I said no. Right after that he went down to the safe. Leastwise, he started in that direction 'cause I heard him when I took Margaret her medicine."

The girl's eyes sought Nick's. "Anything else?"

Nick shook his head. "That's all."

"Hadn't you better summon the police?" she asked.

Nick swore. "I suppose so."

He followed her back to the library, memorizing the facts that had come to him. They were all important now.

MARTHA indicated the telephone and he raised the receiver. He held it a space and put it down.

"The line's been cut," he said.

At this Amory cried. "Have we got to stay in here all night with— with— with th—that? I tell you I can't stand it. I'm going up to my room and to hell with you."

He strode toward the door. Ali ibn Ben Sakr stared after him.

Wyndry glared at Nick. "Dick or no dick, I'm getting out, too; you'll know where to find me. In my room."

Nick watched him go, made no attempt to stop him. They would not dare to run away. That would direct suspicion.

He turned to Ali ibn Ben Sakr. "You may retire too. And you, too, Miss Mayville."

"And you?" she asked.

"I'm going for the police," Nick said.

Her face could grow no paler but her eyes reflected more fear. She went to the desk and returned with an automatic pistol.

"All right," she said, "but please hurry. I am afraid."

Her taking a gun disturbed him; what did she suspect and fear? Ali ibn Ben Sakr must have noticed his perturbation for he said, "I will look after the *sitt*, Sidi, go with Allah upon whom be peace."

Nick found three cars in the garage and appropriated a small coupe. He backed into the turn-around and drove steadily until he reached the gate. Here he shut off the ignition and lights, let the car drift to the side of the road, and stole back to the house. He had palmed the front door key and had no difficulty in getting in.

The corpse was as he had last seen it, and now, with the house ghastly silent around him, he bent over it for a more thorough examination. He must have a definite clue. Who would it indicate? Wyndry, a crook? Amory Blair, a weakling and an obviously spoiled brat? Ali ibn Ben Sakr, a subtle, cool-headed Oriental? Or—he wondered—Martha Mayville? She had the cool assurance for this sort of job.

He moved the body carefully. His hand vanished inside the shirt front, and at once he made a discovery.

The crossbow quarrel had gone through the body. The needle-like point had broken the skin and was now blunted and flattened as if it had struck against steel. Instantly Nick remembered what the butler had said about Mayville going to the safe.

"By George," he thought, "the old man wasn't killed here. He was killed in front of the safe—maybe while it was open. Then his body was brought back here. Hitting the safe is what dulled the bolt and stopped it from going clear through."

Excitement made his heart thud. He wrapped a handkerchief around

his hand and picked up the crossbow. He could see marks in the bolt groove in the oil showing an arrow had recently been discharged. A man could wind a crossbow to that tension, but could a woman?

While he stood debating his next move there rang out from above a sharp feminine scream. Almost instantly came the reverberating concussion of a fired gun.

NICK was halfway up the stairs before the rumbling echo of the shot had died away. Racing along the hallway he heard sobs from the third door on the left. A light glowed brightly. Martha Mayville was sitting up in bed, the gun still clinched in her hands. She aimed it at him, her eyes dangerous. Then the muzzle dropped.

"Oh, it's you," she gasped. "I thought he had come back."

"Who had come back?" rapped Nick.

"The man who— There was someone here a few moments ago. I woke up suddenly, made a noise. I shot at him and he went away. I thought he might be looking for—" Her hand pointed in a direction, stopped suddenly and shifted to a vanity table exactly opposite. My purse. Over there," she concluded.

"What could he be wanting?"

"I don't know."

Nick nodded. "Just stumbled in the wrong room, or was looking for the kitchen," he jeered. And then, suddenly, in a hard voice. "Stop stalling. The man was looking for something."

Nick did not like the way she held the gun.

"I don't know what," her voice was weak.

"Who was it?" Nick's eyes were on the small antique table called a water stand by those familiar with old New England furniture. He strolled carelessly toward it.

"I couldn't say definitely," she told him, "but it looked like Wynydry."

He was a step or so short of the table when she said in a hard, tense

voice, "Turn around and get out. I'm all right."

"Of course," agreed Nick easily. He passed close to the bed, and jerked suddenly, "Is that the man?" He pointed toward the door.

Startled, she twisted her body, and in that second Nick leaped to the bedside, his fingers closed on the gun and with a wrench tore it from her grasp.

"Little girls shouldn't play with such toys," he growled, his eyes hot.

He pocketed the weapon and turned back to the cabinet she had involuntarily indicated. Instantly she sprang out of bed and clawed at him.

"You can't, it's mine," she cried fiercely.

Roughly he thrust her from him. "Lay off," he warned. There was a large antique flower jar on one corner of the cabinet. His fingers seized this, tipped it up. Out slid a chamois roll. The girl moaned.

"It's mine, I tell you."

Nick unrolled the chamois. The Peterhoff diamonds, twinkling with bluish-green fire, glittered malevolently. Nick rewrapped them, dropped them into his side pocket.

"You stole the diamonds from the safe," he stated flatly.

"What if I did?" she admitted sullenly. "They were to be mine. And the old devil refused me a penny, said he would change his will and leave me with nothing. After the years he's taken from me, keeping me here—almost a prisoner—I had a right—oh, what's the use."

"You could have shot that crossbow bolt," Nick said quietly.

Her eyes grew wide. "I didn't," she cried. "I have had that necklace for two days. I stole it and intended to be out of the house to-night when he went to the safe to crow over his jewels. I was on my way out for good when—you come."

Nick thought about this. Then: "Someone else knew you had the diamonds," he said.

"I don't know. Who could know such a thing? Uncle, perhaps, but he—"

"Take your choice," said Nick. "Maybe you'd rather believe your visitor was after—you!"

The girl shivered. Then pulled herself together. "I have no enemies," she said, firmly.

"Sure," said Nick.

He had the necklace. The thing to do now was to scam and telephone the police on the way to town. Yet he hesitated and he finally knew why. An insatiable curiosity gripped him. Who had killed Anton Mayville? On a sudden hunch he strode into the hallway and so to the next bedroom. He entered suddenly without knocking.

CHAPTER IV

THE OTHER SWENSON



SINGLE night lamp glowed. The bed was untouched; and in the corner Ali ibn Ben Sakr knelt on a pillow, arms folded, eyes closed. Nick smelled hashish fumes.

The Moroccan looked at Nick with lackluster, dulled eyes.

"I seek communion with the spirits of the dead," he spoke. "Only a fool could doubt that the dead live on."

Suddenly Nick sprang at the Berber, gripped him, jerked him upright.

If he had believed that Ali ibn Ben Sakr's hashish drunk would make him easy to handle, he was instantly disillusioned. The man exploded in a fury of fight. He snarled, struck with feet and hands, smashed Nick backwards and on a sudden drew a curved knife. Murder lust blazed in his eyes. Swiftly Nick stepped under the upraised blade. His amazing hands worked like lightning.

Ali ibn Ben Sakr writhed in agony as Nick's fingers found nerve centers. He groaned, let go the knife as he half-dropped under a jolting right hook.

"In Allah's name, stop!" he cried. "Good enough," nodded Nick. His hands frisked the Moroccan. Came to the curly oiled hair. The Berber flinched back but Nick's hand came

away with a ball of hair. He opened it.

"The rose diamond!" he murmured. "Ali, you took that out of the safe. You killed Anton Mayville."

Ali ibn Ben Sakr had recovered his Oriental phlegm. "I did not," he said calmly. "I intended to but I would have used my knife. I followed him to recover the rose diamond. I went to the cellar. Anton Mayville was dead. The safe was open. I took the rose diamond. I closed the safe. I carried the body to the living room."

"Why?"

"Amory Blair saw me go down. He would have charged me with murder if Mayville's body had been found down there. That, as Allah is my judge, is the truth.

Nick paused near the door. After all, it was up to the police to investigate this man. It was time now to get along. He felt fairly sure who had killed Anton Mayville. Without speaking he went out.

He found Amory Blair sitting up in bed, in pajamas, a book in his lap. A tray was full of short cigarette stubs.

"Still nosing around?" he sneered.

"Yes," said Nick. "You must have got undressed quickly."

"If you mean since the shot was fired," said Blair, "I could have fired it, got back here and got to sleep before you arrived. I thought a dick moved faster.

He folded the book and put it on the stand. Nick saw that it was by A. Conan Doyle and dealt with spiritualism and life after death.

"You believe in ghosts," he said.

"Why not?" rejoined the youth. "Life would be futile if there was nothing beyond the grave."

"You would deny having left this room," Nick said.

"Of course," said Blair calmly. "only it happens to be the truth."

"It always is," said Nick. "How much do you inherit by your uncle's will?"

"A third of the estate," rejoined Blair. "And I need it."

Nick opened his mouth to speak—

snapped it shut with a start. From downstairs a hoarse, belligerent voice bellowed like a foghorn.

"An' this guy is still here? Lead me to him."

"That," murmured Nick, "would be Mr. Otto Swenson. I think it's time for me to fade."

But before he could get downstairs the Swede detective loomed menacingly over him. A brawny man, with red angry eyes.

"So this is the guy who said he was me," he growled. With deceptive speed his hand came up holding a big six-gun.

"Raise 'em," he yelled. "I arrest you for the murder of Anton Mayville."

Nick blinked, then burst into laughter.

"You think it's funny, eh," said the Swede. "Well, wait until we sweat you with a hose. Then you see. Keep your hands up. Frisk him, Miss Mayville."

Nick sprang into the gun and knocked it up. But as he started a right hook for the jaw, Martha Mayville grabbed him. He realized instantly he would be too late. He lurched into Swenson, hands moving with lightning speed. The Swede jumped back, thumbing the trigger. "One more like that and I let you have it," he yelled.

Then, as Martha Mayville regained her gun, the Swede lowered his.

The Swede swiftly grasped Nick's arm, jerked it with a wrenching movement that made Nick turn to avoid having the arm dislocated in the socket. His other arm was grasped. A double click followed the touch of cold steel to his wrists. Handcuffs!

"Let me get the necklace," Martha cried.

"Sure, go ahead. He's harmless now."

Her hands worked through Nick's pockets. Suddenly she gasped in triumph. "Here's the necklace."

"Good," said the Swede. "Now I work this lug over and make him tell plenty."

Fists doubled, eyes menacing and red, the brawny detective advanced

to beat his helpless victim to a pulp.

Nick sighed. Swenson took a swing that would have smashed Nick's fine aquiline nose flat to his face. But Nick ducked and in ducking shucked off the handcuffs.

He had unlocked hundreds of the same pattern in his acts; rid himself of them head down in the Chinese water torture jar which he had learned under the famous Houdini; unlocked them while roped in a trunk, in a box, in a sealed paper bag. In certain types of handcuffs, the Chinese for example, Nick required the services of an assistant inside his cabinet. But these regulation Little Bobby handcuffs with which he had long been familiar he sprang without a key.

It was a peculiar confirmation of his hands that made the trick possible—wide, flat backs, unusually flexible and supple, no broader than the flat wristbones. All Nick did was to perform an almost invisible series of swift, smooth motions that slid the cuffs down and then safely over the contracted in-bent hands. Simple really—but you had to be born like that.

So when Swenson, snarling at his miss, waded close with his left drawn back for a blow, Nick ducked, brought up his hands and when Swenson left himself open, Nick swung to the jaw. A neat target and a clicking well-placed blow. Swenson staggered back, reeling against the wall.

CHAPTER V

MAGIC PLOT



NICK was amazed; he had dropped bigger men with the same kind of blow. But Swenson returned, groggy, to the charge.

Nick measured Swenson with a left jab, brought around the right from somewhere in the vicinity of his ankles. The blow was solid, satisfying and complete. Swenson crashed to the floor, and this time he did not move. Dumbfounded,

Martha Mayville still held the gun. Swiftly Nick reclaimed it.

"That man is a fool," he said. "You'd better notify the police."

She stared at Nick, speechless.

He bent to frisk Swenson, reclaimed the real necklace which he had palmed there in the first brush and slid it into his pocket. Then without another word, he raced downstairs and out of the house.

He got in the coupé and drove it swiftly to the side road where he'd left his own car, switched over and sped back to the four-width Sawmill Parkway. Here he found a car parked, a cigarette glowing in the driver's mouth.

He parked his car behind it, locked it, put the key under the floor mat and went to the waiting vehicle.

The girl in the waiting car turned on the lights, and from the dash illumination she was revealed as a tall, slim, perfectly proportioned blonde who would attract a second glance from any man.

"I thought you were never coming," she said.

"So did I, Tonna." Nick climbed in behind the wheel and bore down on the starter. "I'm up to my ears in murder and unless I prove who did it, you'll see me in the Tombs and on page one."

AS he drove down the highway toward New York he told her all that had happened.

"You're in a spot Nick," she said. "The police probably can't hang murder on you. But they can convict you of obstructing justice, impersonating a police officer, and illegal entry and robbery. If you don't find the killer, you'll perform your magic in Sing Sing until your beard is in a braid."

"I know who the killer is," said Nick, "but I couldn't prove it. It's damned near a perfect crime."

"Who is the murderer?" she asked.

"I'll tell you later, after I think out a way of getting proof."

They drove on in silence. Then, passing through the Bronx, Nick

said, "How is your ventriloquism getting on?"

From apparently outside the car a cooing voice said, "Oh, Professor Prestino, those marvelous hands. However do you do it?"

Nick grinned. "Good! Could you imitate a man?"

She slid something into her mouth from her bag and a hoarse voice, still seemingly outside the car, said, "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"Darling, you're good," Nick laughed. "Now, in the morning go to the Mammoth Recording Company and beg, borrow or steal some of Mayville's dictaphone records. And put in some practice on that voice. Understand?"

She smiled. "I'm way ahead of you!"

At nine o'clock next morning Nick Preston, gardenia in his buttonhole, strolled into the Treasury Department's New York office in Park Place.

"Good morning, Inspector," he grinned. "You owe me two thousand dollars." He threw the Peterhoff diamond necklace on the table.

Inspector Dunning looked up from the morning newspaper, his eyes piercing Nick.

"An amazingly accurate description," he said. "Listen to this: the murderer who stole the necklace is described by the police as six feet one inch tall, broad-shouldered, reddish brown hair, dark, piercing eyes and a low, commanding voice. What puzzles the police is how he escaped from Private Detective Swenson's handcuffs."

Nick grinned. "It doesn't say how handsome I am."

"You're in this up to your eyes, fellah," Dunning said. "You're the only man since Houdini who could have slipped those come-alongs. Start at the beginning."

Nick did, omitting nothing. "I've won the bet," he concluded.

"Okay. But, Nick, you certainly have gummed up this case. You handled the body, the crossbow; you delayed calling the police until the phone wires had been cut. You

impersonated a licensed dick. You are a key witness that will have to be called."

He paused. Then: "I'll have to tell the detectives on this case what I know. I'm an officer of the law, sworn to do my duty. If I cover you up, this case will never be broken—Mayville's murderer will never be found."

"I think differently," argued Nick. "I know who killed Mayville. I've got an idea, a plan, how to prove it. But I've got to have your help."

"How?"

"Keep my name out of the case and get those four suspects out of the Mayville house while I arrange some apparatus."

DUNNING studied him keenly. "How can you get evidence to convict when there isn't any?"

"What I've got on this killer is absolute certainty—elimination of all other suspects by deductive reasoning—and not one shred of evidence that would stand up in court. I've got to get a confession. And I'm sure I can."

"And if you don't get it?"

Nick grinned. "I think I will. But if I don't, then you can take it from me Mayville's murderer will never be caught."

"And if you fail, do you release me from my promise not to tell the local police about you?"

Nick took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Then it's a go."

Dunning picked up a telephone and called the Beverly chief of police who would be in charge of the investigation. Swiftly he explained that through circumstances which he could not reveal the Peterhoff necklace had come into his possession. Since it was a smuggled article the Federal authorities intended to co-operate in the investigation. He had certain clues that later he could reveal. Meantime, would the chief of police arrest all four inmates of the house as material witnesses and hold them in bail for the afternoon?

Dunning carried weight; the

whole government behind him. And being stubborn and hard he had his way. Finally he hung up.

"The house will be cleared of everybody in an hour," he said. "So what?"

"I want them released and brought back to the house at eight o'clock," said Nick. "I want this chief of police—what's his name—Margrave—there, and I want you there and two of your operatives. I want you in the ballroom. It has a small stage—Martha evidently used it to develop her stage yen—and it will serve my purpose."

"A magic trick?"

"You might call it that," grinned Nick.

He had a tremendous amount to do upon leaving Dunning's office. It took a five-ton truck to transport the material he needed for his experiment. It took two experienced stage hands the better part of four hours to set the stuff in place.

After this was done he had to have a rehearsal with Tonna.

"You got the dictaphone records?" he asked.

"Of course," she replied in a strange, harsh voice.

Nick grinned. "Is that it?"

"That's it," she told him. "Wait and see."

Nick chuckled. "Okay, darling; this has got to be a honey."

At seven o'clock he was at the Mayville house and checked his lighting, his fixtures and had Tonna read her lines. There was nothing now to do but wager everything on the experiment.

"You sit out here in front, right in this chair," Nick indicated. "You must be seen. There can be no idea in any one's mind that any other person is on the stage except myself."

He looked down at the hole in the stage floor which the workers had sawed out according to his specifications.

"Nick," Tonna whispered, "whom do you suspect? Whom do you think is the guilty person? They all seem guilty to me."

"If you'd listened carefully to my

story," he chided, "you'd know who. The one with the greatest motive and the greatest fear!"

CHAPTER VI NICK CONJURES



T was nearing eight o'clock when the prisoners were brought in by Chief James Margrave. Nick was made up for his part. A mephistophelean black mustache and beard, a black wig and a padded hump in his shoulders altered his appearance so that he passed unrecognized.

A small group of chairs were pushed close to the stage and the prisoners seated. Dunning sat near them, hand on gun. Two more Federal agents with drawn weapons stood near the two exits. Besides this, Chief Margrave had two constables.

When the lights in the ballroom were dimmed, only a faint greenish floodlight illumined Nick who was standing in the center of the stage.

The greenish radiance and the serious silence of those present charged the room with suspense and unholy fear.

Keeping his stare fixed on Tonna who sat in the front, ravishing in a lovely evening gown, he said, "Ladies and gentlemen, you do not know me, so I take the time to introduce myself. I am Professor Nicolai Prestino of whom you may have heard, particularly recently when my experiments in spiritual communication attracted attention in England."

He paused to let this sink in. "The police have been kind enough to summon me in the case of the murder of Anton Mayville. Certain evidence they possess tends to incriminate two persons. One or the other is innocent. Rather than force the innocent person to languish months in jail while a trial proved the guilt of one, the police have asked me to attempt here tonight to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt who the guilty person is."

After a cloisral pause: "I am prepared to do this."

"How?" asked Dunning. In the utter silence his voice startled.

"By summoning from the other world the man who has been killed—Anton Mayville himself. From his dead lips we shall have the truth."

Ali ibn Ben Sakr sat with folded arms and bowed head and said nothing. Wyndry sniffed and cursed under his breath.

"It is a truth well known to researchers in psychic phenomena that a released soul does not at once leave the vicinity of its habitat," said Nick. "It is particularly true in case of men who, in their lives, were cursed with the acquisitive instinct and became what we call misers. A miser squatting over buried bags of gold is no different from a man who collects paintings, postage stamps—or jewels. As we all know, Anton Mayville was particularly so afflicted. He is here tonight—in this room—and I propose to materialize him, and have him name his murderer."

A sort of chill swept the room as if bat wings had fanned the air into motion.

"I want you all to approach this experiment in deepest humility," continued Nick gravely. "With your minds opened to the fact that we know not what goes on beyond death save as these rare spirits and those gifted to receive their messages may tell us. It is said that though murder hath no tongue, yet shall it talk. It is also said that the dead may all speak once."

More and more his impressive voice added to the tomblike quality of the silent room. Charged it with electricity so that men squirmed, and breath came quickly in their throats, and they felt the touch of unseen things and the mystery of death. Even those in the secret felt the awe of the unknown.

"I ask you all now to join me in a simple prayer," said Nick. "one that we all know. Our Father—" Carefully he led the prayer and the other voices chimed in.

The lights went down now until

only the green floodlight softly lit the stage.

"Now, you will all join hands and concentrate on summoning Anton Mayville," Nick said.

The rustle of movement was like the rustling wings of death. Tonna saw Nick, who had stood at the left side, now retreat to the center of the stage. Even here he was not twelve feet from his audience. The green light from the footlights against his red-lined cloak, his white tie made a hellish picture.

Nick stood utterly silent. Slowly he raised his hands, clasped them above his head. He seemed to quiver.

"Anton Mayville," his voice came low, haunting, spectral. "Anton Mayville!"

SILENCE! Nick's arms remained above his head; only his silhouette showed to his audience. Again he intoned the dead man's name.

And now those watching saw a sort of bubbly stuff flow from Nick's mouth. Thicker and thicker the volume grew, fell to the floor, piled up. And as it did a sort of smoke fogged the stage for a brief second so that Nick was scarcely visible.

"Who summons me?" said a deep, harsh, angry voice.

Out in front four people sat up as if shocked with an electric bolt.

Now the smoke vanished and the soapy sort of stuff that had bubbled from Nick's lips also vanished as swiftly as soap bubbles will. But beyond Nick, to his right, a figure was materializing in air. A pale milky figure strongly accented by the greenish incandescence of the footlights.

At first there was no more than a white shadow there without shape. Then the head took on proportion, even features began to become distinct until at last it was an old man's head, without hair, without eyebrows, thin and hawk-like and as true as life to see.

Martha Mayville moaned. Then, more swiftly now, the body added itself to the head. The shoulders, then the arms, hands locked behind

in what must have been a characteristic attitude, for Wyndry cried, "Oh, my God!"

Ali ibn Ben Sakr broke his silence. "*Allah Akbar!*" he thundered. "*Allah il Allah Mohammed rassoul Allah.*"

"Silence in the name of those who are invisibly around you," cried the specter. It did seem as if his head turned and burning eyes frowned at the Moslem.

Tensely the watchers sat on the edge of their seats. The ghost of Anton Mayville was all visible now to the polish of his old-fashioned patent leather shoes.

Nick brought his hands down and now stood face to face with the specter, not a foot separating them. Nick made a genuflection. "Spirit of him who is dead, we greet thee with the humility of the ignorant."

"Why have you summoned me?" demanded the irascible voice. "Am I not tormented enough by the knowledge that I am tied, earth-bound, by the wealth that I accumulated, that I hate to leave?"

"We summon you, Anton Mayville, because in this room is the person who killed you."

A breathless hush. Then a gasp, the whistling of breath in nostrils as the figure turned slightly. It seemed to stare.

"Yes, that person is here."

"Would you tell us how you were killed?"

"You make my wound hurt with your words," cried the specter. "Can you not see me before the safe wherein I accumulated those baubles that hold me enchained now? Behind me there is a slight noise. I start to turn. In my back I feel a terrific shock, the blinding sudden pain that is succeeded instantly by the death of my body. In falling I turn so that my glazing eyes take into eternity the vision of that one who had fired the arrow that killed me."

A brief second of silence that was surcharged with fear, dread, suspense.

"And that person is?" asked Nick.

"That person is—" began the specter.

Whatever else was said was drowned by a sudden, terrible yell of unendurable fear and the roar of a pistol shot. The pistol shot was followed by a terrific cracking and crashing and a thunderous roar. And suddenly the stage rained thousands of splinters of glass. Nick hurled himself back to escape the deluge of needle-pointed fragments. Tonna leaped up and fled to the rear of the room. The specter vanished instantly and the lights came on. There stood Amory Blair struggling frantically in the grasp of the two constables.

"He can't come back," he shrieked. "I killed him once and I'll kill him again."

It bespeaks the almost superhuman power of an insanely frightened man that he smashed one constable to the floor, tore away from the other and with three bounds reached the stage, slithering and slipping over the debris of the thick plate glass. He tore straight for Nick.

"In you he came back, you're hiding him," he screamed.

He reached down, seized a jagged splinter of glass and stabbed furiously at Nick. He was utterly stark mad and despite Nick's trained quickness the stabbing point of glass hooked his sleeve and left a nasty gash from the shoulder to the elbow. Then they were locked chest to chest and no guns could be fired for fear of hitting Nick.

Men were crawling over the glass debris but in the space of time that they took, Nick fought for his life. One arm was helpless, but the other smashed a fist into Blair's face, and then his fist thudded into Blair's stomach.

This blow had such jolting effect that Amory Blair was driven backward. He tripped over the glass debris and fell down, cutting his face and neck. As Nick towered over him the man turned, saw the police rushing at him.

One maniacal peal of laughter tore from his lips.

"Not alive," he yelled. "If I can't kill the damned old rat in this world I'll do it in the next."

His hand, still holding the sliver of glass, made a quick flashing movement to his neck. There was a spout of blood from the severed jugular vein, and Amory Blair sank down to die in less than minutes.

It was at least an hour later, after Nick's cut had been bandaged, and the ballroom cleared except for him, Tonna and Dunning, that the T-man said, "Nick, I know it was a magic trick—a beautiful one—but I haven't yet been able to figure out how you did it."

NICK grinned. "The beginning of that trick dates back to 1204, old Sir Roger Bacon, no less, and I believe it must have been known even before that by the old Druids and priests of Ra.

"It is based upon a simple principle. For example, if you are in a room peering out through a clear glass window into darkness, holding a candle in your hand, you will see reflected in the glass, not only the candle flame but as much of your person as the candle lights."

"Ah," said Dunning, "I begin to see."

"Exactly. Now, what I did was this. I erected here on the stage a piece of clear, polished glass about twelve feet square. Down here"—he pointed to the hole in the stage floor—"I had a mirror. Before the mirror I erected the very fine painting of Anton Mayville that reposed until recently over the fireplace. Now, before the painting I have a battery of powerful lights which have dimmers on them that I operated from a switch in my hand connected with invisible wires. After using soap and smoke as a build-up, I turned the dimmers so that the light grew stronger on the picture. This picture was in turn reflected by the mirror to the sheet of glass which was here on the stage but which could not be seen due to my lighting arrangements. I am behind and to the side of the mirror. I can see nothing. But all

you out front see reflected in that sheet of clear glass the image of Anton Mayville's picture, projected from below. As I increase the light the vision grows clearer. Hence you see a shadow that seems to be a ghost."

"Remarkable," said Dunning. "I was awed myself. And, Tonna, your voice imitation was superb."

SHE smiled but looked at Nick and flushed as he said, "Swell."

"But how did you know enough to use this trick?" Dunning demanded. "How did you know it would work?"

"Well, I didn't *know* it would work," Nick admitted. "I knew Blair believed in ghosts. So I took a chance."

"All right, Professor," Tonna lilted mockingly, "why did you suspect Blair?"

"Well, in the first place," Nick said, "the stones in this case were like a red herring drawn across the trail of the crime. It was only when I began to realize that the stones had nothing to do with the actual murder that the truth dawned on me."

Another factor that confused the issue was the body being found where it was. You see, Amory Blair discovered the corpse upstairs. He'd murdered his uncle downstairs. What I glimpsed on his face when I saw him bent over the body was honest surprise and horror. I thought it was caused by his finding his uncle dead. So I ruled him out. But when I discovered that the murder had taken place in the cellar, I knew that the surprise and horror were due to finding the body *upstairs*.

"He was superstitious; maybe he

thought the body'd walked. Anyway he was really rattled—and that threw me off.

"Then the jewels. If the murderer was committed before the safe—why was nothing stolen? The rose diamond was gone. But I couldn't believe Sakr would be so insane as to admit that he'd carried the body upstairs, and taken the diamond, if he'd actually murdered Mayville.

"No one knew that Martha had the necklace. Yet someone entered her room. She thought, to steal the diamond. I thought then, and I think now, that Amory Blair went to his cousin's room for the purpose of killing her.

"Ruling out Wyndry and Sakr—since they were concerned only with the jewels—left Martha and Amory. I began looking for another motive, and found it when she told me of Mayville's threat to change the will. And Amory admitted having heard that.

"And if he could kill Martha, who had no other relatives and had left no will, then he would inherit her third of their uncle's estate as well as his own.

"The jewels weren't the motive. The murderer took no jewels. It was just plain, ordinary gold he was after. Amory needed money." He spread his hands. "Just intelligent suspicion, really. But I was right, and I proved it!"

Dunning had taken out a check-book. "Here's your two thousand—but I'll get five thousand reward for recovering the necklace."

"Better have the necklace, then," Nick said with a grin, and drew the glittering diamond coil out of his pocket. "Not bad, eh?"

RAFFLES AT HIS BEST

—in THE VICTIMS OF RAMADAN, *Next Month's*
Complete Novel by BARRY PEROWNE *Featuring*
the World-Famous Gentleman Cracksman!



Famous Crimes

"THE CORPSE STATUE"



MYSTERY SHROUDED THE STRANGE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BEAUTIFUL MADAME DE MORDILLAC, WIFE OF A FRENCH ARTIST, FROM THE BEDROOM OF HER VILLA IN LYONS, ONE SPRING NIGHT, 1910.

WHILE HER HUSBAND WAS AWAY SHE VANISHED MYSTERIOUSLY — LEAVING NO TRACE. HER BED SHOWED THAT SHE HAD SLEPT IN IT BUT WHEN LEAVING SHE HAD NOT TAKEN ANY OF HER CLOTHING

BAFFLED, THE LOCAL POLICE SUMMONED EDMOND LOCARD, NOTED CRIMINOLOGIST. HIS KEEN EYES DETECTED A SMEAR OF BLOOD ON THE FLOOR. IN THE CORNER WAS A TINY PIECE OF GLASS. EXAMINATION PROVED THE GLASS TO BE FROM A VIAL WHICH HAD CONTAINED CHLOROFORM. THE BLOOD WAS HUMAN BLOOD.



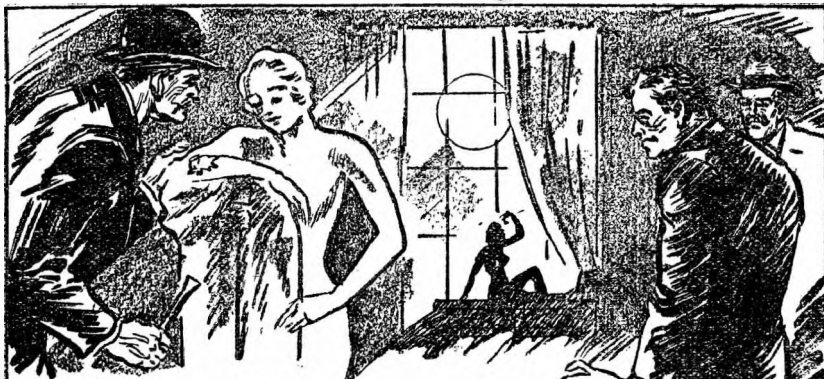
DETECTIVE LOCARD DEDUCED THAT THE WOMAN HAD BEEN RENDERED UNCONSCIOUS AND KIDNAPED. ALSO THAT THE CHLOROFORM VIAL MUST HAVE BROKEN AND THE HAND OF THE KIDNAPER WAS CUT.

LOCARD BEGAN A METHODOICAL CHECK-UP OF ACQUAINTANCES OF MADAME DE MORDILLAC. THIS INVESTIGATION LED HIM TO THE STUDIO OF JACQUES FENOUIL, SCULPTOR. FENOUIL'S INDEX FINGER WAS BANDAGED BUT HE QUICKLY EXPLAINED THAT A TOOL HAD SLIPPED AND CUT HIM.

THE DETECTIVE LOOKING OVER THE STUDIO NOTICED ONE LIFE-SIZED STATUE — A FIGURE OF A WOMAN. HE WAS PUZZLED AS TO WHY THERE WERE SO MANY DEAD FLIES NEAR THE BASE OF IT. UNOBSERVED, LOCARD PICKED UP SEVERAL OF THE FLIES AND POCKETED THEM.



MADAME DE MORDILLAC

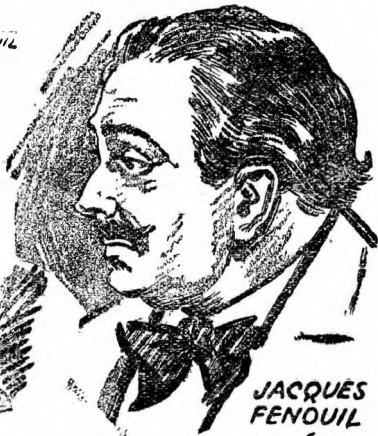


LABORATORY TESTS SHOWED THAT THE FLIES HAD BEEN KILLED BY FORMALDEHYDE.

"WHAT USE," LOCARD REASONED, "COULD A SCULPTOR HAVE FOR EMBALMING FLUID?"

FORCING AN ENTRANCE TO THE STUDIO LATE AT NIGHT AFTER FENOUIL HAD LEFT, THE DETECTIVE EXAMINED THE LIFE-SIZE STATUE.

STUDYING THE GRACEFUL CURVES HE SUDDENLY BECAME AWARE OF THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CRIMINAL. A FEW TAPS WITH A HEAVY CHISEL, AND PIECES OF THE CRACKED PLASTER FELL TO THE FLOOR REVEALING THE EMBALMED BODY OF THE BEAUTIFUL MADAME DE MORDILLAC.



JACQUES FENOUIL



TAKEN INTO CUSTODY, FENOUIL CONFESSED. BEING HOPELESSLY IN LOVE WITH MADAME DE MORDILLAC, HE HAD KIDNAPED AND MURDERED HER. THEN, IN ORDER TO BE ABLE TO WORSHIP HER BEAUTY, HE HAD EMBALMED AND SET HER UP AS A STATUE.

BEFORE HE WAS BROUGHT TO TRIAL FENOUIL SECURED A REVOLVER AND COMMITTED SUICIDE — THUS ESCAPING THE GUILLOTINE.



By Final Rendevous, the Door Was Left Open for Death's Footstep—and the Blinding Ray of Guilt



As he summoned the cab, a heavy hand fell on his shoulder

The Last Stand-Up

By S. J. BAILEY

Author of "Chicago Shakedown," "Hot Dough Heat," etc.

WHEELER knew that neither his stenographer nor the clerk who was reading law in his outer office would think it odd to see a tough-looking egg like Donovan asking for him. They would take him for another client. In the course of his long criminal practise Wheeler had

defended a hundred men such as Donovan and a good percentage of them had beaten the murder rap.

He opened the copper humidor which stood at one side of his carved walnut desk: "Have a cigar, Donovan?"

Donovan grinned as he shoved his great red paw in among the

choice Havanas: "Joe told me you smoked choice ropes." He lighted one of the handful he had taken, stowing the rest in a spacious pocket. "Ummm! not bad. Well, boss, you look worried. What's putting the permanent wave on your dashboard?"

Wheeler's frown deepened. The fellow was cocky. It hadn't taken him long to size up the lay.

"I was just tipped off," began Wheeler, keeping his voice at a low pitch, "that Bradhurst has moved into the Hotel Tremaine."

"Yeah?" Donovan took a long drag. "So what?"

Wheeler squigged his palm suggestively along the glass top of the desk.

Donovan's jaw dropped. He grabbed at his cigar. "Not—not Bradhurst?"

Wheeler nodded.

"You want me to rub the D.A.?" Donovan's third finger flipped spasmodically at non-existent ash.

"Well?" Wheeler shot out the questioning word in a defensive manner.

Donovan clamped his hat on his head. "I got a rod to hire for legitimate work, see? But I ain't anxious to burn. Nothing doing on the D.A." He turned to go.

"Wait!" Wheeler's jaw was a leaden boulder. Donovan paused and looked around. "You realize that you are in this neck-deep now? If I have to get Joe to send me somebody else, he's going to have two jobs instead of one. Get me?"

Slowly Donovan returned to the desk. His face was a pasty color. He said: "All right, I'll do it. But you got to make it an even grand. Otherwise—"

"Five hundred now," said Wheeler, "and five hundred when you deliver. That satisfactory?"

Donovan sat down. "Boss, this guy Bradhurst sure has got you in a tight spot, ain't he?"

Wheeler ignored the remark. "There's a six-story garage across the street from the Tremaine. The motor ramp goes all the way to

the top. You can use a car. The getaway will be a cinch."

"You want me to drill him from across the street?" Donovan shook his head sorrowfully. "You don't know the game, boss. The best way to rub a guy is to lay for him in an alley, drop him and scam. May take little longer to get him in the right spot but it's much safer. Now the way I croaked Butch Fargo—"

"You're getting paid plenty to do this my way," cut in Wheeler. "Got a sub-machine-gun?"

"So that's it. Want me to rake his room clean, eh? Well, maybe—"

"I asked you—" began Wheeler impatiently.

"No, I haven't. But don't let that worry you." Donovan chuckled. "Tommies are like top hats. You can always hire 'em for special occasions!"

"Good. Bradhurst has a two-room suite on the fifth floor. Room 532. He has dinner there every night about eight-thirty. Can you get set by tonight?"

"Yeah," said Donovan.

"You'll see a red light burning in a room on the fifth floor. You'll know that Bradhurst's room is the one to the left. The one to the left," he repeated, "remember that."

"To the left of the red light. Yeah, I got it."

"One thing more," went on Wheeler. "Don't forget to rake the room with the red light too. I—well—I don't want too many smart witnesses running around loose; get me?"

WHEELER entered a booth in the basement of the building. He wasn't taking any chances making the call from his office.

In a moment he heard a familiar voice.

"Madge? This is Harry."

"Sa-a-y, big shot. Where have you been?" The voice was eager, cordial.

"Never mind that now," he cut in sharply. "Want to do something for me?"

"Any time," came back the silken voice reassuringly.

"Then hop over to the Hotel Tremaine tonight about eight o'clock and ask for the room you reserved. Understand?"

"Aw, Harry—" he imagined he could see her childish pout. There were times when he felt a strong urge to brain this dame. He was glad he had planned to— He heard her rattling on: "It's silly to go to a stuffy old hotel room when—"

"Listen, Madge, get this straight. Bring a small suitcase with you and a piece of heavy red sash. When you get there tie the sash around one of the lights so's it shows red. Turn all the others out. I'll be waiting for that signal that everything's okay. As soon as I see it I'll come up."

"But Harry, what's the sense of lugging along a suitcase—"

"Because it's a swell joint, you nfnny. You can't get in without it. And listen, if I'm a little late, leave the light burning. Wait for me."

"All right, big boy. But get this from me. You'd better show up like you're saying. I've been stood up by you before and once again would be just once too many."

Wheeler climbed the stairs leading up into the lobby and took the elevator to his office where he remained until about seven-thirty. When he came down again, he was debating where would be the best place to establish his alibi. As he passed out into the street he came to a decision. He would go to the Central Casino where he would be sure to run into plenty of people who knew him, respectable citizens whose word would carry weight as witnesses.

As he raised his hand to summon a cab, a heavy grip fell on his arm. He turned and was somewhat shaken to see Hamas at his elbow. Hamas was attached to the district attorney's office. Could he have been following and had he overheard the conversation in the booth downstairs? Ever since he had been grilled down in the D.A.'s office

last week Wheeler had been worried sick about that Mike Schluss affair.

"Sorry to trouble you, Mr. Wheeler," Hamas was saying, putting, as it seemed to Wheeler, a slightly sarcastic emphasis on the "Mister," "but the chief sent me out to hunt you up. He wants to have another little chat with you. Got some spare time right now?"

Wheeler glanced hurriedly at his watch. It was twenty minutes to eight. It sounded as if the D.A. were staying downtown late tonight. He hoped that nothing would go wrong, that Bradhurst would not queer his plans by failing to return to the hotel.

HE said: "As a matter of fact, I'm in a bit of a hurry. Have a date that's pretty important. Don't you suppose the D.A. would be willing to wait until morning?"

Hamas grinned. "I know how you hate to see the D.A. work overtime, especially on a case like Mike Schluss. But that's the kind of a prosecutor he is—stays hot on the job until he hears 'em read the stretch. Better come along with me now."

Hamas steered him into the waiting cab and gave an address to the driver which Wheeler did not hear. He noticed that the cab turned uptown.

"Hey," he burst out, "he's going the wrong way! The D.A.'s office is—"

"The D.A. went home," said Hamas. "You ought to feel honored. You're being entertained by him in his private apartment tonight."

Wheeler gulped once and turned hastily to look out of the window. During the balance of the ride his mind was in a riot. He tried to think of how he could call Donovan off the job. But there was no way to get in touch with him. His only chance was to get Madge on the wire and call off the signal.

As the cab pulled into the curb, he said: "Hamas, give me a break

and let me phone the dame, will you? She's going to be expecting me and I hate to disappoint her."

"No harm in giving her a ring," consented Hamas.

Wheeler pulled the door of the booth tight shut behind him. Hamas was standing about five feet away. He'd have to take the chance. He dropped the nickel and waited. From where he stood he could see the bobbing head of the hotel switchboard operator. A nauseous dread swamped his senses as he heard her say that no one answered in 534. He stumbled from the booth, almost into Hamas' arms.

"Hell! You look all in, Wheeler. What's the matter, did she bawl hell out of you?"

"Couldn't get her," mumbled Wheeler.

Hamas grinned widely. "Too bad," he said. "Gues it'll have to be a stand-up, eh?"

"Look here," said Wheeler, gathering himself together a bit, "I'll give you a century if you'll tell Bradhurst you couldn't find me. In the morning I'll be glad to—"

"Nix on that," cut in Hamas. He grabbed Wheeler's arm. "Come on."

A NEATLY uniformed Negro was setting the table in Bradhurst's room as Hamas ushered Wheeler in. Bradhurst was seated in a huge overstuffed chair, reading the evening paper. He cast it aside and nodded cordially as Wheeler stood in the center of the room, running the brim of his hat through nervous fingers.

Bradhurst's temples were pleasantly greyed. His open, almost chubby face hid a lightning mind and a relentless will. Wheeler knew that his cordial tones masked a deep-lying, solidly-grounded purpose.

"Sit down, Wheeler," he directed. Wheeler complied, finding no comfort in the friendly tones. He glanced out of the window and shuddered at sight of the row of dirt-streaked garage windows across the way.

Bradhurst was opening a stout brief-case, arranging some papers on the desk. "You know, Wheeler, I've been going over the Schluss case and it becomes increasingly apparent to me that you have been withholding information that would involve prominent people in this town. I think it's about time you realized that we don't care whom we strike with this investigation. The mayor'll back me in anything. We're out to clean the town. I'll give you another good chance to come through with what you know. I can promise you the minimum term." He paused while the Negro came in with a tray and deposited its contents on snowy linen. "You know," he resumed, "we'll get this evidence in the end. You realize that, don't you?"

Wheeler pulled out a handkerchief with a hand that felt numb. He mopped his brow and then started to massage it mechanically with a damp palm. Directly across the room was the connecting door to Room 534. By now Madge had probably arrived. Pretty soon she would be arranging that signal. If there were only some way to wise her up.

He realized that Bradhurst was waiting for him to say something. He tried to think swiftly, logically as was his courtroom custom. He said: "Mr. Bradhurst, I see your dinner is all served and getting cold. Why don't you eat it? I'll step out in the corridor and chat with the boys for a while—"

"Not necessary at all, Wheeler. I wanted to have a good long talk with you. I figured you and I could get together on this Schluss affair. That's why I asked you up to dinner."

Wheeler noted with horror that the table was set for two. He got up abruptly and walked around the room, still carrying his hat. He wondered if Bradhurst was wise. But no, he couldn't be for he would not wilfully expose himself to such danger. The man was not that much of a fool.

Wheeler realized that in another minute, if he did not get control of himself, he would be giving himself away. He fought a silent, swift inward battle. This thing could be worked out in some way—

He laid his hat on the telephone stand and swung around to Bradhurst who was watching him with a queer look of expectancy. "I guess you think I'm acting kind of funny. Fact is, I'm upset. Hamas dragged me in here tonight before I had a chance to call off an important date. It's a stand-up now and I'm a little worried about it."

"Forget it," said Bradhurst, shrugging. "What's a dame? There's plenty more around. Now let's put the feed-bag on. Then we'll get down to business. I know you and I can make a deal. Maybe you might not have to take any rap at all."

All through the dinner Wheeler kept pulling at his collar with a none too steady forefinger. A couple of times his knife slipped off the table and thudded on the thick carpet. He kept turning around to look out of the partly opened windows. He had not pulled his chair close to the table; instead he perched himself lightly on the edge of it, his whole body tensely poised.

They were just starting on their dessert when a loud clatter sounded from the street outside. Wheeler did not even glance at Bradhurst. He made one sprinting leap which landed him sprawling on the floor under the window sill.

Bradhurst swung around in his chair and eyed him questioningly. The noise had stopped suddenly after the first terrific roar. Bradhurst got up, advanced to the window and looked out.

"They just closed one of those big corrugated steel garage doors," he said. "It makes a terrible racket. But— your nerves must be on edge to make you act like that, Wheeler. What's the matter?"

Wheeler got to his feet and walked back to the table. He wore a sheepish expression.

"You're white as a sheet," went on Bradhurst, gazing at him in increasing alarm. "Say, what's up? You act like you're expecting something to happen any minute. Out with it! What's up?"

Wheeler jerked his head from side to side. "For God's sake, Bradhurst, let's get out of here. There's a machine-gun planted—"

He was cut short by the *rat-tat-tat* of slugs that ripped through the windows, whined past them and drilled into the opposite wall. Wheeler flung himself to the floor, crawling on his belly to the safety zone under the window. Bradhurst started to follow him but not in time. He hit the floor, a bleeding, riddled heap.

The door burst violently open but no one dared enter. It was certain death to advance into that bullet-raked hell. The lengthening, irregular row of jagged holes traveled across one, then two windows. Then it began the backward death sweep. Donovan sure was doing a complete job.

THE slugs had scarcely ceased to thud into the walls of the room when Wheeler heard a shrill scream from next door. Donovan was being as good as his word. There would be no squealing from that dame.

A minute later there was a roar of a motor in the ramp of the garage across the street but scant heed was paid it. In Room 532 Hamas was bending over the dead body of the district attorney. He looked up at Wheeler, a cold, deadly gleam in his eye.

"I believe you know something about this," he gritted. "You were too damned anxious to keep out of this room tonight."

Wheeler shrugged carelessly. The immediate danger to his own life past, he could think clearly again. He knew that Hamas had nothing on him, would have to let him go after asking a few questions. After all, he had been in the same room with Bradhurst.

The gun had been fired from outside. He had a perfect alibi after all. "You're wasting precious moments," he said. "The killer was apparently in that garage across the street. Probably made his getaway in a car. You should be notifying Headquarters right now to get the radio cars in action."

A key scraped in the lock of the door leading into 534. A uniformed officer appeared in the doorway. He was scratching his head in a puzzled manner. "Mr. Hamas, there's something funny in here. You'd better take a look around."

Wheeler followed Hamas into the room. It was suffused with a soft red glow which was caused by the red sash wrapped around one of the lights. The girl's body lay huddled over the desk. Hamas

walked over, lifted her head and picked up a piece of hotel stationery.

She had evidently been writing a note when the bullets pierced her body.

Hamas grinned as he read:

Big shot, this is the last time you are standing me up. I fixed the signal and waited here an hour and you did not come. I am going now. Good-by, has-been. And listen, big boy; in case you don't know it, you spilled plenty when you were half drunk at my place week before last. What I don't know about the Schluss case now—oh, my! Well, Harry Wheeler, I think I'll toddle over to the D.A.'s office tomorrow. I sure would like to see you get it in the neck for standing me up this way, you big punk. There's a way to—

Hamas turned to the officer: "Stick the bracelets on him, Larry. There's enough here to make it first degree."



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By **WESTMORELAND GRAY**

Author of "G-Heat for Seven," "Death Rides the Bus," etc.

CHAPTER I

FUNERAL PYRE

WE cleared the last signal light and headed out of town. I herded the department coupé through the thick traffic and kept my eye on the



Stacey

judge's green sedan ahead. I had my hands full trailing him, for the little ex-jurist was a nifty driver and knew how to make time. And he had plenty of reason to be scared. It was a pretty nervy thing he had

done, turning in the dope on his crooked partners.

We rolled out Singer Avenue with the judge leading by a couple of hundred feet. Nobody showed any interest in us. I watched the cross streets, alleys and the cars to our rear. Singer Avenue turned into a wide state highway. Dusk was closing around us. The judge turned on his lights and I followed suit. Another half mile and we turned off onto a graveled secondary road which led to Barnum's home, a swell country place four miles from town.

We hadn't gone a mile when I knew something was wrong. A car with blazing headlights had turned in behind us and was overhauling us—plenty fast. I smashed down on my horn twice and the judge's car led off with a tremendous spurt.

I tromped on my accelerator and hung close on his tail. The needle went up to seventy. Gravel sprayed from our wheels like hail. The sound of our going was like thunder. All three machines sped in a high cloud of dust shot through by the glaring headlights.

We didn't have a chance. The car behind must have been doing eighty when it pulled up behind me and started around. I drove with one hand. The other was snaking my Smith and Wesson automatic from its hideout holster. Those devils behind me meant business.

A Complete Novelette of Gripping Mystery



"Why did you kill him?"

Then I heard something that almost made my stomach turn over. Machine-gun fire! Chattering out, harsh and ugly and spiteful, above the roar of the cars. I didn't feel anything, heard no slugs cutting through the metal of my coupé. But the next second my rear tires were bumping, my bus had gone crazy on the road and I was fighting it out of the ditch.

The car behind swept around me like a cyclone. A big black sedan. The judge's car went over a hill with the other right after it—and then my headlights were only glaring into a thick fog of dust and flying gravel.

I didn't stop. I went lurching ahead on two flat tires, swearing, and foolishly holding the accelerator down to the boards. I finally made the top of the hill. In spite of the dust I could see what was happening ahead.

Judge Barnum's car had gone into the ditch at the bottom of the incline, curbed there by the black sedan. The rattle of a jabbering machine-gun came back to me and I could see it spitting fire like something gone mad. The green car, Judge Barnum, everything in it must have been riddled.

I kept bumping ahead. The machine-gun went silent and for five tense seconds there was a deathly hush except for the echoes. I saw a figure or two darting about the two cars. Then the judge's car suddenly burst into flame, roaring so high it lit the whole roadway. That fire was no accident, I knew. The car had been splashed with gasoline and then lit.

After that the black car lurched into gear, roared away and went over the hill like a comet.

I pulled up as close as the heat would allow. The machine was a mass of howling, hungry flames by now. There was nothing I could do but watch it burn. And there was a horrible, sickening odor to it. The odor of burning flesh. Human flesh, I shuddered. Here was the funeral pyre of Judge Hugh Barnum, the

peppery little man whom I had set out to bodyguard to his home!

I was all raw and outraged inside. The little man had done a nervy thing to try and bust up a dirty ugly racket, and the first shake of the dice I let this happen to him while he was in my care.

It did things to me inside—made me sick, nauseated. And I'm no amateur either. I'd been undercover man for the D.A. for a year, and I'd been a F.B.I. special agent for two years before that—and a G-man is supposed to have cast-iron guts.

I was remembering what led up to all this. That afternoon Judge Barnum had come to Wilkins, the D.A., with a story it took plenty of courage to spill. Wilkins had called me in to sit in on it. The judge was a thin, small, ultra neat little man who had retired from a district judgeship three years ago to join a firm of well-known criminal lawyers. Lately he had been suspecting that something was screwy with the firm, and he had finally learned that their legal practice was a front—that his three partners were up to their eyebrows in one of the ugliest rackets in crookdom—shaking down fugitives and escaped convicts.

FERRETING out these frightened and hunted men—and there were scores of them hiding in a city the size of ours—Barnum's partners got the goods on them, tapped their hidden incomes, or spoils from their crimes, or even their honest wages, for whatever the traffic would bear. Barnum had come to Wilkins with the whole story—and Wilkins had turned the ease over to me. Barnum admitted that the law office was clean—a raid on it would uncover nothing incriminating. But somewhere—possibly at the home of the three men—there was a cache of their loot and all their damnable blackmail evidence.

I set wearily to work changing the tires on the department coupé. Luckily it carried two spares. While

I worked, I tried to think. It looked mightily like the partners had somehow got wind of Judge Barnum's move. I checked them over in my mind. Frank Potter, a dapper, brisk man of small stature, lean, middle-aged. Ira Hamer, cold-eyed and efficient, a man to be afraid of in court. Paul Callaway, pompous, portly, dignified. Had they plotted together to murder Barnum? If so, they knew he had already been to the D.A. and they'd move plenty fast now to cover their tracks. It meant I'd have to move faster to get anything on them.

Two motorcycle patrolmen came popping over the hill just as I got the coupé ready to roll. As they came up the gas-tank of the burning car let loose and splattered a barrier of the flaming liquid completely across the roadway.

I told them briefly what had happened and left them in charge of the fiery wreck. I made time back to the edge of town and pulled up on crying rubber at the first drug store. In the phone booth I dialed the D.A.'s number. Luckily he had not left his office.

"Barnum's just been machine-gunned," I told him bluntly and didn't spare myself in giving the details. Wilkins has got sense—he knows the breaks go against you sometimes in this hectic game. "It means that bunch knows he turned 'em in. They know, too, they'll be plenty hot—and they'll take their stuff and blow."

"What do you want to do?"

"Put out a radio call for that kill-car. Black Olds sedan—probably with the windshield out so they could fire a machine-gun over the dash. Send two men out to Frank Potter's house to learn things. Send two to Callaway's. Tell them to take the joints apart. Arrest the men on any charge to hold 'em. I'm going myself to Ira Hamer's—it's nearest here."

"Want any help?"

"I'll call you if I do."

Right there I made a mistake. Lord knows I'm no hog for glory

and don't make a habit of tackling jobs solo that might require a squad. But I guess some sort of an inferiority complex was working overtime inside me. I had just made a nice black mark about the size and shade of a switch engine against my record, and was over anxious about redeeming myself.

CHAPTER II

POKER TROUBLE



AMER'S house was a lonesome old place frowning on Hampton Parkway out beyond the line of street lights. It was on a half-block of ground, with cedars and other shrubbery around

it, and looked as gloomy as I felt at the moment.

I curbed the coupé two blocks away and walked on toward the house. And I didn't go clanking. I gum-shoed up to a side gate and stood in the shadow of a salt bush to look the house over. It was dark as a miner's pocket, top to bottom, and I might have passed it up as deserted if there hadn't been a tiny flash of light in one of the dark library windows. Just a wink—as if some one had momentarily flicked on a flashlight inside.

I stepped silently into the yard and, hugging the shadows of a line of hedge, crept along to the side porch, under an arbor. I waited here and listened. No sound came from the inside. I started across the porch for the door.

My foot touched something soft and lumpish on the concrete. I shuddered and halted, suddenly jittery with premonition. Slowly I knelt and groped about the cement floor. My hand encountered thick woolly fur—sticky fur.

It only took me seconds there in the dark to determine what the thing was. It was a police dog and it was dead—shot between the eyes. I puzzled over this. Why should anyone kill a dog except to prevent

alarming the house? A shot would have caused greater alarm than the dog. Only one explanation came to me then. A silenced pistol.

I stood at the door, turned the knob. Stepped through into the abysmal blackness of a hallway. I didn't like it a damn bit, but I went on, steering somehow around all the obstructions—chairs, tables, what-nots—in the hall. I found a door on my left and pushed it open. It squeaked a little on its hinges and I cringed. After a moment I moved across a wide room and dimly made out another door—open.

Then my luck played out on me. I inadvertently groped against a ladder-back chair, tipped it over and it fell on the floor with a noise that reverberated through the house like the crash of doom.

I stood still, frozen, listening. A guarded footstep up front. My gun was in my hand now. I moved into the next room, stood, backed against the wall.

Don't ask me how I knew it. But I did beyond the slightest doubt. I wasn't alone in here. Someone was across in the darkness on the other side! Moving only my arm, I groped along the wall until my fingers touched the light switch. I jabbed it.

The flood of light showed instantly that the person was gone now, the heavy portieres across just falling into place.

I leaped across the room, flung through the portieres, stabbing the Stygian darkness beyond with my flashlight, held in my left hand. The light struck the swift movement of a queer flopping figure that was darting for the hall doorway. Some one in a long black slicker, face masked in black, hat pulled low. Then the figure was gone into the great hallway beyond, and I went sprinting after it.

I didn't get all the way across. I stumbled and fell. I scrambled up, but did not go on in pursuit. Instead, I turned back and turned the flashlight on the thing that had tripped me.

It was the body of Ira Hamer. He lay sprawled on his back, one leg doubled up grotesquely under the other. He was dead. I knew that from the glazed stare of his wide open eyes, his slack jaw. A red stain sopped his shirt front over his heart and drooled out on the carpet, staining it a reddish black.

He hadn't been dead long. A little warmth was left in his body. And the faint odor of powder smoke still hung in the room. I stared down at him, feeling cheated. I had come here expecting to find Ira Hamer a murderer—and had found him murdered.

THE killer—the figure in the black slicker and black mask—had just left this room!

I moved toward the hall, snapped on the lights in there. It was empty. I listened a moment. But no sounds came. I started toward the rear of the house. Room after room I passed, lighting them as I went. Finally I was back in the hallway which led to the side porch where I had entered. No sign of anyone in all my search.

Then I did hear the faint squeak of a door. Up front—up near the den where Hamer's body lay. On the balls of my feet, softly as a cat, I started up there—not turning on the lights this time. At last I parted the portieres and peered into the dark den.

Something moved at the big desk. I stepped through, got my left fingers on the light switch, and my gun gripped in my right.

"Don't move!" My voice cut dramatically across the hushed darkness. "I've got you covered and I'll shoot."

In the blazing light I stared across the room. Standing at the desk, staring back at me was a girl—a very trim, beautiful girl in a man-nish suit. A desk drawer was open and she had just stepped away from it. A dead flashlight was in her hand.

Now I'm no moron and I can tell

class when I see it. And this girl was class with a capital C. Not the flashy kind, all encrusted with diamonds and glitter—but somebody with culture and family and background.

But she was desperate. I read that in her eyes. More desperate than afraid of me standing with my gun on her.

"What did you kill him for?" I demanded.

She expelled her breath with a long gasp. "I didn't."

"Well—I'm sorry. I'll have to hold you for the police. I'm an officer."

I started toward her. She backed away. Her eyes went darting about. Could she have been the figure in the black slicker? It had been a slight figure, probably no taller than the girl.

"But I didn't kill him—I didn't!" She was verging on hysteria. And it was no act. I know the real stuff when I see it.

"Then you won't mind an investigation?"

The thought seemed to terrify her. She backed against the wall and stood with her arms spread, staring at me. I didn't like this a bit—but I couldn't forget that Ira Hamer had been murdered, with this girl on the spot.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

She controlled herself with a great effort. "I don't have to talk."

"No. But if you're innocent, I thought you might want to help solve the murder."

She looked at Hamer's crumpled figure. Bitterness, contempt came in her face. "I haven't the slightest desire to see his murder avenged. I'm glad he's dead!"

Coming from her that was a jolt. And it wouldn't help her case—with me or with the cops when they came on the case. I looked at her and came to a decision. I couldn't see any hook-up between her and the killing of Judge Barnum. But there must be a connection between Hamer's murder and the other one.

And if the girl knew anything to help, I needed to know it, and know it quick.

She had a little flat purse gripped tight in her hand. I reached out swiftly and snatched it from her. She cried out and grabbed to retrieve it. It came open and its contents spilled on the floor. A dozen little trinkets scattered about—compact, coins, mirror, a slip or two of paper and a key.

Still with one eye on her, I stooped to pick them up. One after another I stuffed them back in the bag, glancing at each as I did so. Nothing here told the girl's identity.

I studied the key, a Yale key with letters and numerals stamped on it—STNBA-612.

Puzzled, I slipped the key into my vest pocket.

I saw the girl move, like a darting bird, but I didn't know until later what it was she hit me with. It was a brass poker which had been too near her hand, leaning there against the wall. And she did a good job with it. I remember slogging to my all-fours, while my head seemed to come off and go rolling across the floor. Then I flattened out and lost all interest in subsequent proceedings.

HOW long I was out I don't know. It couldn't have been more than ten or fifteen minutes. My head was throbbing like a trip-hammer and there was a nice gash across my scalp which was oozing blood that trickled down my face. The room was dark as pitch, the whole house silent as a tomb. I staggered to my feet, stumbled across to the switch and snapped on the lights. Dazedly I stared around the room.

At first I thought it was a nightmare of my stunned brain. I stood rooted to the spot, just stared and stared at the place where Ira Hamer's body had lain, unable for a long time to believe what I saw—or rather didn't see.

For Ira Hamer's body was no longer there!

CHAPTER III

BELLBOY'S TIP



FINALLY I moved across and examined the spot. The blood-stain was still there. Then I hadn't dreamed it all. I drew a sigh of relief.

Then I felt in my pocket for the Yale key. It, too, was gone.

I made a round of the house, though I think I knew from the silence and from the *feel* of the place that I was entirely alone in it now. I found nothing, and came back to the den. I wasn't ready to turn this over to Headquarters yet. I was at a dead-end and wanted to find some sort of lead before the cops went tramping all over the place.

Back where the girl's purse had flipped open I knelt and studied the floor. My hopes sank. Of course she had gathered everything up. But just as I was about to give up, my eye caught something white under the edge of the desk.

I snatched it up, studied it. A slip of paper, which she had missed because it had fluttered under the desk. It was a hotel memo, scribbled on a regulation telephone call blank.

Room 813

A party called while you were out but would not leave a number. Requests you be in your room at 2:30 and will call again. D. y Clerk, St. Elmo Hotel.

"Thank you, young lady, for leaving your address," I said grimly. "Otherwise it might have been difficult to find you."

I found something else in my search. I had pulled out the drawer of Hamer's desk and looked through it. I found nothing of interest until I lifted the paper that lined its bottom. There on the pine I saw written, "STNEA-612." The same thing that was stamped on the key in the girl's purse! That lent new importance to the key now.

After that I found the telephone and called Wilkins. He was still on

the job. Things had been happening too thick for him to get away this night.

"Send the Homicide boys out to take over Hamer's place," I said, and wearily began to recount the fiasco of my visit here.

He cut in. "Is anything the matter, Stacey? You feel all right?"

"Of course, I don't feel all right!" I yelled back angrily. "My head's bursting open and I feel like hell. But I'm telling you exactly what happened. Hamer's body's gone, but he's been murdered—because I saw the corpse. You get Homicide on this quick and have enough men out here to take this house to pieces. They may find Hamer's body and the loot from that fugitive protection racket. I can't."

"All right, all right! Anyway, Hamer's is not the only body that's disappeared, though we're not sure the others are dead."

"Who's that?"

"Frank Potter and Paul Callaway have vanished. Both have been gone since last night. Same thing happened in each case. Somebody called for them at their homes and they never came back."

"What do you make of all that?"

I asked.

"Looks to me like one of their victims got sick of bungling up and started cleaning out the whole nest. Thought the judge was in on the racket, too, or else feared his blowing off would start an investigation that would turn up the victims as well as the victimizers."

I frowned. My head was throbbing horribly. "Whoever's doing this is after that partnership loot," I said, and believed it. "One partner is killing out the rest—killer take all, see? Hamer's dead, we know. Potter and Callaway have disappeared. One of them is doing the elimination stunt."

"Fine. How'll we know which one?"

"Find the bodies. The one that's not dead is the killer, of course."

Wilkins laughed. He has a maca-

(Continued on page 114)



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(Continued from page 112)

bre sense of humor. "It sounds fantastic, Stacey. Anyway, we've got a lead on the Barnum killing. We found a gasoline can evidently thrown from the kill-car the other side of where the judge's car burned. There was a fingerprint on it."

"Did it match anything?"

"Yes. We were lucky. It was in the files. It belonged to a convict who escaped from San Quentin in 1932. A lifer who had killed a policeman in San Diego. Named Creepy Dan Moreley."

"One of the Potter-Hamer-Callaway victims!" I cried. "Listen, Wilkins—wire out there and get all the dope on Moreley you can. Find out what his profession was before he was a criminal. He may be working at the same kind of job here."

Wilkins said, "I'll get it all for you, Stacey. And don't feel too bad about the two busts—Barnum and Hamer. It's the breaks. I'm still expecting you to carry on. Are you coming in now?"

"No. I got a date. With the girl who wielded the poker."

"I'll be damned! You're sure your head's all right?"

But I hung up on him.

I found the bathroom and scrubbed the blood from my face and stuck some adhesive tape on my head wound. There was some Scotch in the buffet in the dining room and I took a stiff drink of it. Two squad cars drove up and I turned the house over to Lieutenant Burnes without regret. Then I made my way up the street to where I had parked the coupé.

The St. Elmo Hotel is the best in town, and that's the kind I'd have expected the girl to stop at. At the counter I took a look at the register. I didn't find what I was looking for, so I showed my badge to the clerk and asked questions.

"Room 813—yes, sir. Miss Grace Starr. She's been stopping here several days. Hope there's no trouble, sir."

I started to say, only a couple of murders and two kidnappings, but refrained and took the elevator.

There was a light showing through the transom of Eight-thirteen. I rapped on the door.

There was no hesitancy. The girl opened it so quick I got the idea she was expecting some one.

But she certainly wasn't expecting me. She pressed knuckles against her cheek and stared at me. "You—" she gasped.

"Yes. I'm the man you hit with the poker, don't you recall? Mr. Richards—Stacey Richards of the district attorney's office."

I pushed into the room, closing the door behind me. She retreated before me.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

There was fear in her eyes now.

"It was very clever of me. It was all written down for me—and I read it." I showed her the telephone memo.

SHE sank down on the bed, still looking at me as if terrified. I dragged forward a chair and sat down.

"What do you want?" she asked finally.

"Well, after all, a murder's been committed."

"I didn't do it."

"Miss Starr, there's no use stalling. You know you're subject to arrest. You were there, your actions were suspicious. I'm not ready to put handcuffs on you yet—but I want some answers from you—and I want them straight. First, what happened to Ira Hamer's body after you knocked me out with the poker—and where is it now?"

This time, I believed her surprise was genuine. "What—what do you mean?"

"I mean somebody carried the body away—and either you did it—or saw who did!"

"Oh, but believe me, I did neither. All I did was grab up my purse and things, turn out the light and get away from the house. Hamer's body was still lying there when I left."

"And you don't know who took it?"

She shook her head, and somehow I believed her.

"All right, cross that one off. But you had a key—a most important key, stamped STNBA-612. I want that key and I want to know where you got it and what it unlocks."

"I tell you I don't know anything about it—nothing! I haven't the key."

Now she was stalling. And I was boiling up under the collar. I jumped up and stood over her.

"Miss Starr, don't be a fool! You can't expect to hoodwink the law this way. These murders will be sifted to the bottom. The cards are stacked against you. If you don't hand over the key to me, I'm going to lock that door and search every inch of this room and your person! It may be embarrassing."

Her face was set in as grim and determined lines as an enticingly young and pretty oval face could be. She returned my look, stare for stare. Both of us were tense as stretched fiddle strings. A sharp knock on the door broke the tableau.

I leaped back against the far wall, drew my gun and jammed it in my coat pocket. I wasn't going to be caught napping this time.

"Answer them—let them in—and act natural!" I ordered.

The girl seemed for a moment about to faint. She caught her breath, called, "who is it?"

"It's the ice and mineral water you ordered, Miss Starr."

"Oh, yes, of course."

She opened the door and admitted a bellboy carrying a tray with a pitcher of ice cubes and two tall bottles. I stood back against the wall, feeling half sheepish, yet somehow feeling that it wasn't all on the up and up. The bellboy put the tray on the dresser, turned back to the door.

"Is that all, Miss Starr?"

"Yes. Here you are, boy." She tipped him and closed the door behind him. I relaxed.

(Continued on page 116)

"I have REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT"

... writes George Bailey



"I suddenly realized that I had become a fat man". The boys kidded me about my big "paunch".

At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.

In a bathing suit... I was immense. The day I heard some clever friends of mine I decided to get a Weil Belt.



What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist... and 30 pounds off my weight!

It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place... and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!

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(Continued from page 115)

I locked the door. And set to work. I went over the room and adjoining bathroom with a fine tooth comb. I ransacked every inch of the place—and two years in the F.B.I. has taught me how to do a real job at that sort of thing. The result was nil.

"You're next, Miss Starr. If you prefer I'll take you down to headquarters and let a matron search you."

"But I haven't the key. I really haven't."

I looked at her. She seemed greatly relieved, no longer under the strain she had been before.

THE truth dawned on me then, staggered me a little. I cursed myself for a blind fool. The bellboy! Instead of tipping him she had handed him the key!

I unlocked the door and flung out into the hall. I jabbed my finger on the down button and held it there until an elevator came. I rode down and made tracks for the night manager's office.

It wasn't long until I had every bellhop in the place lined up in there. I looked them all over and my hopes sank. The one who had come to Grace Starr's room was not there.

"Is this every man on duty here tonight?"

The bell captain checked over a roster. "There's one missing," he said finally. "He was here thirty minutes ago."

"Who is he?"

"Mike Starley."

"Get me his home address."

The manager was accommodating enough. He furnished the address, and I rode out to the place only to find that it was a vacant lot. I drove back to headquarters feeling plenty low. Twice murder had struck right under my nose, twice Grace Starr had outwitted me—and still I was in as much of a fog as before I started.

But I got busy with some telegrams and within an hour I knew

all about Miss Grace Starr. She was an orphan belonging to an old and rich family in St. Louis. Socialite, up-and-up. But she had a *bad* brother. Younger than Grace by three years. He'd got in a night club row and allegedly killed a college student over a hat-check girl. His trial had been twice postponed because the prosecution couldn't get the evidence against him. Out under heavy bond, young Starr had jumped it, been a fugitive for eight months. St. Louis wired a description of him, and then I knew how big a sap I'd been. Beyond a doubt, the bellboy, Mike Starley, was Grace Starr's brother, Mitchell Starr.

I bent over and invited Wilkins to kick me. But he didn't. He frowns on horseplay.

More news came that night. A wire from San Diego. Creepy Dan Moreley, the man who had left a fingerprint on the gasoline can near the Barnum killing had been an embalmer in the days before he turned criminal. I wired them to wirephoto his picture—a business we work through the cooperation of the *News-Journal*. Then I went home and went to bed.

It was not until late the next day that I realized his being an embalmer merited more than a routine investigation.

CHAPTER IV

TWO IN A GRAVE



THE next day was a hellcat for false leads, rumors, wasted effort and general misery. Of course, the whole business broke in the papers in a dozen garbled and conflicting accounts. And my name blazed from the headlines, when it had been our policy to keep my work out of publicity. All in all, I had plenty besides a reaction from my head injury to make me sore.

By five o'clock we had accomplished exactly nothing. Every cop in the city had raked his beat in

search of the body of Hamer, as well as of Potter and Callaway. Cars were searched, lakes dragged, storm sewers searched, cellars and vacant houses examined. Radio dragnet was put out. But the only result was a sore and touchy police force, frazzled nerves and indigestion for everybody. It didn't stand to reason that one—or perhaps three—bodies could be hidden anywhere in the city and not be turned up by that search.

Homicide cooperated fine—even if they did gripe about it. When the wirephoto of Creepy Dan Moreley came in, Chief Danvers and I went into a huddle. We showed it to six plainclothes men and started them out in pairs checking over all the undertaking establishments in town for sight of an embalmer with a face like that.

Grace Starr's hotel room was under surveillance, with orders I was to be phoned the minute she left it. Also her telephone had been tapped and two detectives were spelling each other listening in.

At five o'clock I lounged in Wilkins' office and read through the afternoon paper down to the last want ad. Then suddenly I had a hunch. Creepy Dan Moreley was an embalmer. That suggested funerals. I turned to the obituary column, my hand shaking a little because of the idea suddenly blooming in my brain.

I read the death notices; there were a dozen or more. But I was looking for two—or three—funerals by the same undertakers. I found two; conducted by the Breuslauf Funeral Home, interment in Shady Rest Cemetery that morning. The deceased were both people unknown to me, but names were not stopping me just then.

I jumped to the telephone and called the numbers of those homes, one after the other. I offered condolences as a friend and hung up, feeling sold out. They were genuine funerals all right, and genuine deaths.

(Continued on page 118)



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(Continued from page 117)

"What in hell's got into you?" Wilkins asked.

"Get an order to open two graves," I returned. "And give me a pick and shovel squad to do the digging. Also send two of those men on the Creepy Dan detail to the Breuslauf place. See if the embalmer there isn't Creepy. But if it is, don't let him know he's spotted until I get back!"

Wilkins frowned. "Opening graves is bad business unless you know what you're doing. Do you?"

"I think I do."

The Shady Rest is an old cemetery with a great many trees and perfectly landscaped grounds. It's a highly respected and revered place. The old caretaker threw a fit when I told him what we wanted. But he respected my badge and the writ I showed him. He led the way, muttering complaints, to the first of the newly made graves.

I had a uniformed cop and four husky men with me. I started them removing the flowers carefully, until they uncovered the mound of new earth. None of them liked the job. Sweat was already pouring from their faces and their eyes were grim.

They started digging, working two men at a time. It was dark now and the hovering trees seemed weird and spectral. The hollow *thud-thud* of the picks and the monotonous *chuff* of the dirt as they shoveled it out was unnerving—and I felt the tension tighten almost unbearably as they came nearer and nearer to the casket. More than once the men stopped to groan and mop sweat from their faces. At last a pick *thunked* on the pine outer box.

I was kneeling staring over there into the pit, flashighting the dark interior. How sepulchral the shovels sounded as the dirt was raked from the pine lid!

Then the men were working with the lid, raising it, disclosing the silver handled grey coffin beneath.

"Open it up," I said.

They unbolted and raised the upper portion of the coffin top. I threw my flashlight glow on the glass there and stared at the face under it. It was the shrunken, lined face of an elderly man I had never seen before.

"Well, I guess you're satisfied," the cop said heavily.

"No, not yet. Lift the whole lid off the coffin."

I was goaded by suspense as they worked at this. But at last they opened the lid full length and again the flashlight's rays stabbed down into the grave.

EVERY man there cried out at the desecration we saw. Closely packed and doubled up in the lower portion of the coffin was the body of a second man. We had to turn the face upward to see who it was. We saw the pudgy face of Paul Callaway—now slack in death.

"Lift it out and put it in the patrol car," the cop said wearily.

While we went on to the other grave, my mind was filled with questions. Who would be the unwelcome sharer of that coffin? Frank Potter or Ira Hamer? And if Creepy Dan Moreley had killed all three of these men, to free himself of the menace of their knowledge, where had he disposed of the third body?

Thirty minutes later, part of my questions were answered. We had opened the other new grave, unsealed the coffin and had discovered in it—packed exactly as Callaway's had been—the body of Ira Hamer.

I was fully convinced now of Creepy Dan Moreley's complete guilt, that he had murdered not only all three of the partners victimizing him, but Judge Barnum as well. That somewhere, possibly in another such grave, we would eventually find the body of Frank Potter.

As we drove back to town with our grisly cargo, I curbed the coupé I was driving at a suburban drug store and sought a telephone. I called Wilkins.

"News," I said. "We're bringing in Hamer and Callaway—both shot through the heart."

"I was afraid of that," Wilkins said. "Looks like Dan Moreley has cleaned up that racket for us, doesn't it?"

"Yes, and he took poor Judge Barnum along as tarred with the same brush. Moreley is smart. But for a hunch we might never have found these bodies. And with no *corpus delicti* we could never have convicted him of the crimes."

"Well, he's good as hung now!"

"You mean—"

"I mean the boys we sent out to Breuslauf's have spotted Creepy Dan Moreley—got a glimpse of his face. He's working out there as an embalmer, under the alias of Henry Stallings.

I was suddenly filled with elation. A dirty racket had wiped itself out and the killer of four men would soon be in our hands. "I'll meet you two blocks this side of the Breuslauf place—and we'll close in."

Wilkins was already there when I arrived. We parked the cars and stepped along toward the funeral home.

It was a huge dwelling, built along old-fashioned lines. There was a floodlight across the green lawn which gave a weird ghostliness to the shrubbery. A neon sign in the corner, with its odd brilliance, lent incongruity to the somber dim-lit house itself.

An unctious manager met us in the office. His manner changed immediately when we told him our business.

"The embalming room is in the basement, gentlemen. That's where Stallings is now. I sincerely hope there'll be no undue disturbance. There are guests here with loved ones in state—"

"Don't worry," Wilkins said shortly. "Show us where to find the basement stairs."

Low voices of the few people in the place only accentuated the profound and oppressive silence. The

(Continued on page 120)

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(Continued from page 119)

manager led us silently over soft carpets and pointed out a door.

"Come on," Wilkins clipped. "Five men are picketing the outside. Your gun working?"

I nodded and soundlessly pushed open the door. Narrow carpeted stairs led downward. We descended stealthily, brought up before another door.

I turned the knob, shoved the door open and leaped through, my gun out.

Nothing happened. The lights were on full. It was a big square room with marble white walls and a white tiled floor. Around three sides ran a vitrous-surfaced shelf



which drained off into a white sink. Overhead were small cranes reaching out from the wall like long, glistening white and skeleton-thin arms. I knew these were for handling the bodies. On a marble-white rolling table lay a nude corpse. But one quick glance told me I did not know the face.

Then my glance, sweeping the room, came to rest with a jerk on a huddled form in the far corner. Wilkins, beside me, gave an exclamation, and we both went striding over to stare down at the still body of Creepy Dan Morley!

I knew the face at once, from the wirephoto. A lined and drawn face, seeming more troubled than vicious.

Neither Wilkins nor I needed to stoop for an examination. We knew that the man was dead; could see the blood soaked bullet wound over his heart. We had come here for a murderer—and found instead another victim.

CHAPTER V

RESURRECTION AND DEATH



WILKINS was the first to break the silence. "Looks like your first hunch was right. Nobody's left now but Frank Potter, guess he was forcing Creepy Dan to help him, burning the judge's car and disposing of the other bodies in the coffins. Then when Potter was through with him—he shot him."

"With a silenced pistol. Otherwise the shot would have alarmed everybody here."

Wilkins looked as if he tasted something bitter. "Now we've got to find Potter. He's smart too. Well—we've spiked his *corpus delicti* idea, but he may be long on the lam by now."

The manager was rubbing his hands, waiting anxiously for us at the top of the basement stairs. He opened his mouth like a goldfish with horror when we told him about Creepy Dan Moreley.

He said after gulping several times: "You're wanted on the phone, Mr. Richards. Somebody in a hurry."

I made tracks for the office and took the receiver. It was Brown, one of the men we had tapping Grace Starr's telephone.

"Somebody called her about thirty minutes ago," Brown said. "Somebody she seemed plenty scared of. Asked her to come to 1803 Boxer Street—and bring the key. She's gone there to meet him now!"

Things began to click in my brain then, pieces falling into place. I hung up with a bang and turned on Wilkins.

"You take care of the routine with Moreley and pray for luck for me!" I said. "I'm taking a fast ride. If things are the way I think they are, I'll bring you back the killer!"

"How about somebody to help?" Wilkins called as I made for the door.

(Continued on page 123)

HEADQUARTERS

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet



FRESH from his triumph in combating the fiendish spy ring that threatened the peace of Europe, RAFFLES finds himself once more in the toils of crime.

The scene of the newest adventure of the debonair, steely-nerved gentleman cracksman, is Morocco, land of mystery, whose dark secrets have never been bared by civilization's hand! There, against the sights and smells of the bazaar, the turreting minarets, the clash and color of the East and West, a group of Europeans become involved in an angry, desperate game of death.

Strange Menace

Guests at the Villa Sidi Amar find themselves strangely menaced. Murder stalks the shadowy gardens, lurks behind the towering cypress trees. Mysterious glimpses are caught of a man in a black burnous, and, wherever this evil figure passes, the hand of death lays a chill finger on one more terror-stricken victim.

It's all told in Barry Perowne's full-length RAFFLES novel, THE VICTIMS OF RAMADAN, and it's a high-water mark in the gentleman cracksman's sensational career.

As fanatic Mohammedans riot in the streets, intent upon their fantastic yearly rites of Ramadan, a sinister murder plot holds the Villa Sidi Amar in its grip. RAFFLES is one of a quartet of survivors of grim slaughter who find themselves threatened with being sent into that whirlpool of hysterical destruction—the streets of the Moslem quarter during the bloody season of Ramadan!

How Raffles unveils the master murderer, makes one of the most absorbing stories ever to appear in THRILLING DETECTIVE.

A Murder Chase de Luxe

Another headliner in next month's issue — LADDER TO DEATH, a novelette by Paul Ernest, a sizzling story of a murder chase de luxe, humming with the rattle of gunfire, and bristling with action from start to finish.

A fiction treat of the year!

A Fast-Paced Manhunt

When Andrew Cairn fell to his death from the thirtieth floor of the Century Building's steelwork, only Peter Jordan guessed that it might be murder! It takes a G-man to hunt down the sort of rat that Andrew Cairn's murderer was, and if the hunt leads him within inches of the brink of eternity—well, that's just part of his job!

How Peter Jordan does that job in the face of overwhelming odds is excitingly told in Hugh B. Cave's action novelette, BACKFIRE, in next month's THRILLING DETECTIVE.

Many Other Thrillers

Besides these headliners—many other stories, each one packing a punch on every page!

Your comments, ideas and opinions are invaluable in planning future issues. They help us in living up to our motto: "Every issue better than the last."

See you next month.

—THE EDITOR.

MURDER GAME

(Continued from page 120)

"The men tailing Grace Starr will be close around," I called back over my shoulder.

I was running at full speed by the time I hit the sidewalk. Grace Starr thought she was making a trade—but she was walking into a trap.

The pieces were fitting together. The girl's brother had managed to slip the key back to her. And I knew what it was the key to, now. The safety deposit box where the law firm's loot and incriminating evidence were cached. If it had been a private safe the key would not have been so vital—the lock could be forced or the safe blown. But a person could hardly go into a bank vault and start blowing the boxes open!

STNBA-612. How simple it all was now! State National Bank, Box Number A-612!

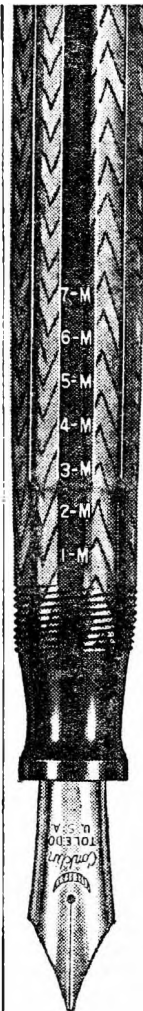
Grace Starr had got the key at Hamer's, of course. But she had been unable to use it to remove the evidence against her brother—as the officials at the bank would not allow a stranger to open the box. On the other hand, the murderer, though he'd probably have to work a subterfuge to get to the box, was checkmated without the key.

Grace Starr thought she was making a deal—the key for the evidence against her brother. But the murderer could hardly make such a bargain without betraying his identity. So I knew that the girl was walking to her death as surely as she met the man at 1803 Boxer Street.

I cut corners on two wheels. I ran through two red lights, scraped a truck and left behind me the shrilling whistles of traffic cops. But in seven minutes I was turning into Boxer Street, a strip of bad paving in a cheap west end addition.

I parked in the fourteen hundred block, where the street lights played

(Continued on page 124)



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(Continued from page 123)

out and walked casually ahead. It was a lonely stretch of drab dark houses, whose hard-working inhabitants had long since retired for the night.

Eighteen hundred block was only half built up—four or five cottages. There was a vacant lot on the corner. The cottage beside it then would be 1803. Even in the darkness it appeared unoccupied. No shades or curtains at the windows and the grass on the scant lawn was tall, unkempt, weedy. I crouched in the shadow of a sycamore and waited.

Presently a taxi came up, halting across the street to disgorge a passenger, then driving on. It was Grace Starr and she walked directly across the street, paused a moment to stare at the forbidding, lightless and empty house, then started up the walk. It must have taken plenty of courage for her to enter that place.

Swiftly I ran across the lawn to overtake her. She gave a startled glance around, ran up the steps and the next instant was inside the dark door. I drew my gun, stepped across the porch and yanked at the door. It opened easily and I stepped across the threshold into a pitch-black room.

I stood a second debating. I could see nothing but blackness, even no dim shapes of furniture. Then from the rear of the house, the silence was shattered by a terrified scream, which was instantly and suggestively cut short.

The girl! She was already in the killer's hands!

I sprinted forward as I drew my gun. I found a door, snatched it open, plunged into a hallway. I groped for the light switch, pushed it—but no light came on. I ran on, found another open doorway and went through.

"Grace! Grace!" I called at the top of my voice. "Where are you?"

From somewhere back in the void her voice, breathless, answered me.

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(Continued from page 125)

could see the vague grey outline of the furnace but nothing else. The killer was waiting for me, waiting for me to make some betraying sound or movement.

There came a rustle of movement. A foot scuffed on the concrete. I whirled to my right, glaring into the darkness, gun pointing that way.

Someone chuckled, a harsh, ugly sound that chilled me like an icy wind. A voice spoke, the same rasping voice.

"Shoot, Mr. Richards. Go ahead and shoot into that corner. You'll riddle the pretty Miss Starr!"

I tried to place the sound, but couldn't for a moment. Then suddenly I realized it came from above—up in the rafters. Then something like a huge and fluttering bat flung down from just over me. Heels crushed down on my shoulders and crashed me to the floor. Hands clutched at me. I twisted, writhed away and slugged hard at where I thought the face was, trying desperately at the same moment to bring my gun on the fighting figure.

My blow glanced harmlessly off. I whirled around to fire pointblank into the black thing—and took an almost stunning blow on the back of the head. I stumbled to my knees, still clutching slick, rubberized cloth—a slicker.

A gun went off nearly in my face, half-blinding me. Its blaze burned my cheek. I leaped back and fired, but heard the bullet ricochet off the concrete. Then in a single leap I was around the corner of the furnace.

I crouched there peering out. I could hear my assailant breathing hard. I watched and waited.

How long we were like that I don't know. My sleeve rubbed against the furnace, making a slight noise. Instantly the gun fired and the bullet clanged like a gong against the furnace.

I fired at the flash. Heard the sickening *thuck* of lead against flesh

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and felt, rather than saw, the black figure falling to the floor.

But he wasn't done for. Not yet. He fired back and the bullet cut across my left shoulder like a white-hot knife. I fired again and drew another shot. And fired again and again.

"You take a hell of a lot of killing," I gitted, a little berserk.

But he was dead now. No more shots came from him, no rustle of movement. I left him lying there while I strode across to Grace Starr. My flashlight showed she was bound and gagged. But it didn't take me long to remedy that and lift her to her feet. At that moment there were heavy footsteps in the house above and shouts and calls.

My answer brought the men below—Wilkins who had got the address from Brown, the man tapping Grace's telephone—and the two sleuths who had been tailing Grace Starr and let her give them the slip.

We gathered around the figure in the black slicker and black mask, flashlights pouring down on him. Wilkins stooped and swiftly stripped the mask from the dead face.

"Judge Barnum!" he cried.

I wasn't surprised. In fact that killing in the car had seemed phony from the first—and then a man who worked three years with a trio of partners and didn't know they were crooked—well, it just wouldn't wash!

"He was playing a murder game with us," I said. "He had already killed Frank Potter when he came to tell you his tale of woe, Wilkins. He had the body in his car then! He asked for me to trail him home—so that I'd be a witness to the killing. Creepy Dan Morcley—forced to help the judge because of the hold Barnum had on him—was posted out to follow us, cripple my car, then fire the machine-gun into the judge's—after Barnum was safely out of it and into the black sedan. He killed Potter, Hamer and

(Concluded on page 128)

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(Concluded from page 127)

Callaway to get the partnership loot —and the key to the lock box. He killed Creepy Dan because we found Hamer's and Callaway's bodies and traced them back to Moreley, whom the judge knew would squeal. And the body disappearances weren't altogether on account of the *corpus delicti* angle. Barnum turned his partners in to us so their disappearances would look like they'd got wind and taken it on the lam."

We opened the lock box the next day and found enough loot to tempt a man of Hugh Barnum's ilk to go on a killing spree. We found evidence that started a big round-up of wanted criminals hiding out in our city. But Mitchell Starr had jumped the gun on us. He had caught a plane and left for parts unknown. We think he's somewhere in South America now.

And I don't know that I'm sorry. Because—well, because Grace Starr was mighty wrapped up in her rascal brother—and now I've gone and gotten wrapped up in Grace.



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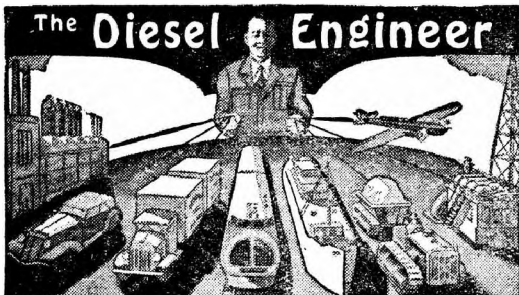
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