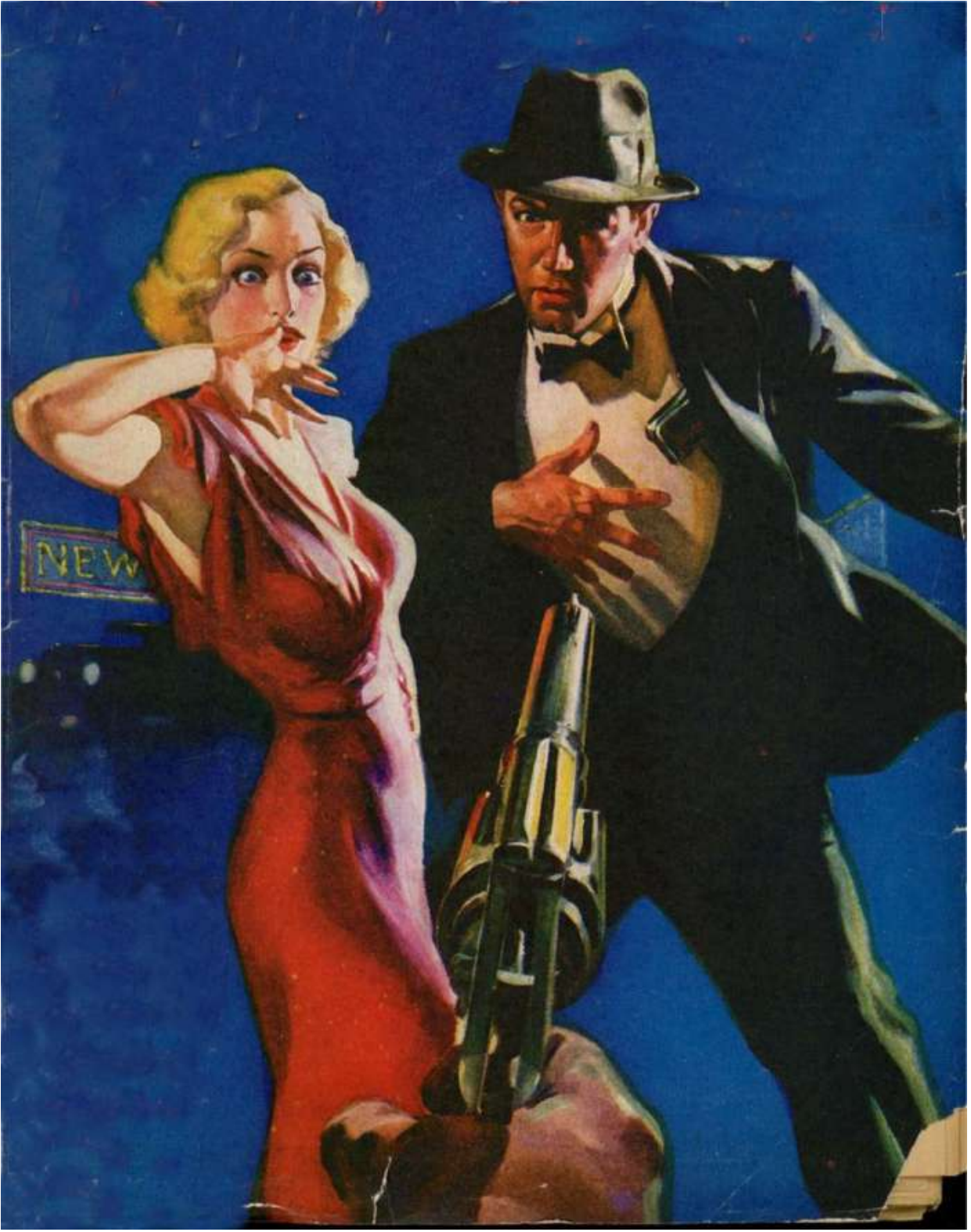


# **Baker's Dozen-07 Detective-02**



## **Publisher's Page**

Welcome to the second Baker's Dozen collection of Detective fiction from the pulps; The Baker's Dozen series tried to thirteen rousing stories by thirteen different authors from thirteen different magazines. For some genres this is easier than others. For detective fiction there were scads of detective pulps. Which case the challenge is to find detective stories in magazines not know for detective fiction. Below is a table of contents with acknowledgement of each stories source, Enjoy.

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Blue Book, Apr. 1937. Art: Austin Briggs. Words: 5300. A Duke Ashby story.

3 - A Pearl of Price by Raymond S. Spears.

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5 - The Chinese Box by C. K. M. Scanlon.

Black Book Detective/ Jan. 1948. Art: unsigned. Words: 1800.

6 - The Dead Client By J. Lane Linklater.

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7 - The Case of the Golden Lily By Francis D. Grierson.

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8 - Death's Advance Shadow by Arthur J. Burks.

Phantom Detective, April 1941. Art: unsigned. Words: 4900.

9 - The Murder Masterpiece By G. T. Fleming-Roberts.

Secret Agent X, Sept 1934. Art: Words: 4900.

10 - The Ten-dollar Hunch by Robert Sidney Bowen.

Popular Detective, March 1938. Art: Unsigned. Words: 4900.

11 - The Love That Kills by Norvell W. Page.

Detective Tales, Dec. 1935. Art: "bib"? Words: 3500.

12 - The Dead Are Always With Us by Clint Morgan (ps Edwin Truett Long).

Spicy Detective, June 1936. Art: unsigned. Words: 6800. A Jarnegan story.

13 - Don't Fence Me out by Brett Halliday,

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Total Word Count - 61500 words

This collection was assembled by Brian Eatl Brown. June 2022.

## He Gave Him A Gun By Laurence Donovan.



*To Avenge the Murder of His Best Friend, George Burke Grimly Battles to Outsmart a Wily Killer!*

MORIARITY, the traffic cop, rubbed the back of a red-haired hand across his eyes. When he took his hand away, the man with the gun was still there. He was walking toward the Greystone Branch Bank now.

The man with the gun was wearing a neat, brown business suit. A soft hat that had a snap-brim at the right angle to shade his vision from the mid-afternoon sun. He was moving purposely toward the entrance to the bank.

The gun was carried carefully under the man's left arm, the muzzle pointed down at the sidewalk. The man appeared entirely oblivious to the gaping peasantry of midtown Manhattan. He seemed to be accustomed to those villagers who will crowd around a ballyhoo boy threading a needle, and who will buy thread because it went into the needle.

Moriarity's traffic whistle shrilled. His thumb flicked a button on the flap of his holstered revolver.

"Hey, you!" he shouted, leaving traffic on its own and shouldering his way onto the sidewalk. "You with that gun! Stand still there now! What th' devil do you think you're doin'?"

The tall man halted, turning mild, blue eyes upon the cop. He blinked behind rimless glasses secured on a fine gold chain. His left hand gently stroked his long chin.

"Meaning me, Moriarity?" he said pleasantly. "I'm the only one about who seems to have a gun."

The traffic cop partly restored his dignity by roughly pushing three goggling youths and wanted to know why they were holding up traffic that way?

Moriarity's ripe tomato face suddenly became redder. He made a movement to conceal the hand that had been furtively sneaking his revolver from its leather. His other hand wiped sweat from his forehead.

"By damn!" he grunted apologetically. "I didn't know you, Mr. Burke, in that new suit. Everybody was actin' kind of scared when they seen you--"

"Apparently going out for a little hunting in the peaceful jungles of the West Side," finished the tall man cheerfully. "It's a fowling piece, Moriarity, designed to kill birds. Seeing that birdshot would hardly make a dent in the tough stool pigeons of this district, and they being probably the only worthwhile game on the wing, I'll not be violating the ordinance against discharging firearms, et cetera."

"That's a good one, Mr. Burke," said Moriarity, chuckling. "But I seen you goin' toward the bank an' I had to think fast. Maybe you might've been a tougher bird than a stool pigeon."

HE saw George Burke's mild grin, so he judged his retort must have been clever and he laughed. A policeman halting a man with a gun carried openly was enough to block any sidewalk. Moriarity turned and waved a big hand.

"Move along, alla yuh! There ain't gonna be any shootin'! Out of the way there, an' let Mr. Burke through to his bank, you. This way, Mr. Burke."

Moriarity wedged an opening with a rough shoulder. In the entrance to the bank, George Burke smiled again.

"Thanks, Moriarity," he said. "Sorry to have caused you all that trouble. The fowling piece has jammed and I couldn't find the carrying case for it. I brought it down to a shop to be fixed. I'm going up country tonight. Season opens at midnight."

"Good luck, Mr. Burke," Moriarity said, and went back to unsnarl the traffic at the corner.

So Moriarity failed to see the stony grimness that erased all the smiling mildness from Burke's face. He did not hear the words that gritted through Burke's suddenly clenched teeth.

"And good hunting, Mr. Burke!" said the banker to himself.

Moriarity, four years now on the bank corner, the recipient each Christmas of a brand new five-dollar bill from the mild George Burke, would have been greatly shocked to know that a dead man sat in a locked apartment which Burke had visited less than an hour before. A dead man dressed in a tuxedo and a bullet in his head, whose very evident suicide the mild George Burke had set himself out to avenge.

George Burke walked swiftly through the bank lobby. Two clerks who were checking up books, glanced up and saw his long-chinned face, and immediately returned to their figures. Burke opened the door with the word "President" marked on its frosted glass.

He walked inside and set the light shotgun, a hand-tooled fowling piece, inside the washroom door. Then he came back to the wide, neatly kept desk. James Foster, the president, had always been a careful, orderly man. His desk always was as clean when he went to lunch, as when his papers were locked away for the day. It was well that this was so, for today James Foster had not returned from lunch.

Burke had been at his own cashier's desk when Foster had gone out at one o'clock. Foster had nodded, then had an afterthought and turned back. He had removed a bright, newly notched key from his ring.

"Thought you should have a key to my private file, George," he had said, and smiled when he said it. "Might save you the trouble of having it jimmed open if I should forget to come back from lunch some day."

Burke now took this bright, new key from his pocket. He went over and inserted it into a steel filing case, the oldest and least modern in the office. Before he removed any papers, Burke stepped swiftly to the narrow, heavily barred window giving light from a short alleyway at the rear of the bank.

"I didn't imagine it then," he muttered. "They were in the crowd when Moriarity stopped me, and they followed me here."

All he had seen in the alleyway had been a man's slouch hat. But it had been pulled back too quickly as he had walked to the window. Burke reached up and closed the slatted shade.

THERE were various papers concerning the bank's business in James Foster's private file. Burke's mouth went tight when he picked up one and read:

Changes in my will, as suggested, doubtless will be unimportant when this document is read. It is my sincere hope and belief that my daughter, Lela, will by this time have become Mrs. George Burke. . . .

Burke's face was grimmer still a minute later. His hand shoved aside all other papers when he had opened a letter from a small package that had been carefully sealed. He read:

"So, my dear Foss, I told you in stir why I never would carry a gun. I didn't start out to become a torpedo. They take the raps, just as I took that one. I leave the rods and the choppers to the boys. That has kept me out of trouble. The Law can be morally certain of my little rackets, but the damned cops will never pin another rap on me.

"This time I am compelled to request more than the usual remittance. The time has arrived to clean up our old affair. So you will get together the fifty grand by the 20th, even if you have to "borrow" some from your bank. Much better this way than to see the depositors lined up after the tabloids have been anonymously informed that James Foster, bank president, is none other than one Gilbert Foss who served a stretch up the river."

A crossed "X" was the only signature. But Burke's blue eyes were no longer mild behind his gold-chain glasses.

"So that was why he was sitting in that East Side dump with 'Silky' Stevens the night I blundered upon him," murmured Burke. "If he had seen me then-" Burke broke off his short soliloquy sharply. He pulled newspaper clippings from his pocket. One of these said:

*Inspector Monahan told the Reflector that the man killed attempting to collect the Groton extortion money is a member of the Silky Stevens crowd. It's a moral certainty that Silky knows all the answers in the Groton case, as well as in several unsolved homicides.*

*The public criticizes the police for not taking drastic action against such known employers of killers and heads of rackets. But the best boys from the D.A.'s office never have pinned anything on Silky. His alibi is always unbreakable. He has personally never been known to go armed.*

*Surprised in his office at the Red Roller Roadhouse, Silky Stevens has proved more than once that he will not permit a more dangerous weapon than a toothpick about him, unless it is in the pocket of one of his own personal torpedoes. Though absolutely convinced that Silky is the head of numerous shady enterprises, there has never been a time when the police have been able to get evidence that would stick.*

*For more than twenty years, the smooth Silky had beaten every possible rap. The cops can't walk in and shoot a man down, however strong may be their personal belief he is a killer who works through others. . . .*

The clipping was dated but two weeks before.

GEORGE BURKE read it through twice. Then he stuffed it with the letter from James Foster's personal file into an inner pocket. The open statement in the *Reflector* merely repeated the charges that had appeared in other newspapers. It was easy to see that editors had little fear of libel.

"You can't libel a man who openly boasts of his power and hires killers," said Burke softly. "The big town's full of them. The police know them by their first names all over, and the dumbest cop on a beat can pretty well recite the rackets and the murders for which they are responsible."

Burke arose to his little better than six feet, then his shoulders drooped slightly. They helped maintain the mild aspect of his blue eyes and queer, long chin. He went into his own office, came out with a short ramrod and an oiled cloth. Glancing at the shaded window, he walked into the washroom.

Anyone close to the door would have heard a phrase coming from his tight-set teeth.

"I told you in stir I never would carry a gun," he recited. "I leave the rods and choppers to the boys."

The ramrod could be heard thudding softly as George Burke cleaned the hand-tooled fowling piece.

One of the clerks looked up as Burke emerged a few minutes later from his own room and locker at the rear of the bank. Burke was wearing a light tan coat, cord breeches and laced boots, with a long-visored cap over his gold-chained eye-glasses.

"Well, well, Mr. Burke!" said the clerk cheerfully. "I can see this weekend is going to be tough on the birds. How about a pheasant for my collection?"

"Perhaps I'll have no luck, Jenkins," said Burke, smiling. "Would you like a nice stuffed buzzard? Or a crow, Jenkins? Last season I shot only a skunk. Purely in self defense, of course."

The clerks guffawed over the pleasant humor of their boss.

"Good hunting, Mr. Burke!" the other clerk wished heartily. . . .

GEORGE BURKE brought his coupe into the parking spot at the Red Roller Roadhouse in a drenching rain that made the darkness of the night more tense, and the lights of the roadhouse more brilliant. When he climbed out, his tan hunting coat was spattered with red clay and hung in discouraged, wet folds around his slightly stooped, bony shoulders.

Only a dozen customers were in the dining room around the dancing floor. A fat bartender was wiping glasses. The orchestra hadn't begun to get hot yet. Perhaps there were other customers behind the green baize doors at the head of a stairway. Burke wondered if newspaper hints that Silky Stevens

paid good protection to county officials for his gambling layout might be true?

A hat-check girl drooped a lower red lip and stared at him. Burke strode past her, wiping the rain from his glasses, his right arm cradling a muddied shotgun lightly. A broad-faced doorman with a squint in one eye and bulging shoulders, stared awedly at the new arrival.

His eyes played over the uncased fowling piece. It was his business to make sure none of the customers threatened the dignity of the Red Roller by appearing with weapons conveniently concealed.

"Wait a minute, mister," he said to Burke. "Better check your artillery. This ain't no target range."

BURKE blinked at him benevolently, and looked ruefully at his light shotgun.

"I am merely having a drink to keep me warm, and I must wipe off the mud before it spots the barrel," he stated quietly. "It's a nice piece, hand-tooled by Steger. You know, the Steger who puts in weeks on a light gun like this."

The doorman quirked his mouth and scratched a crumpled ear.

"Steger?" he said. "You wouldn't mean 'Butch' Steger over in Brooklyn? Hell, mister, he's poison. An' he ain't peddlin' no rods. He buys 'em."

"I'm afraid we are not thinking together," said Burke gently. "I'll not spoil any napkins. I've got an oiled rag in my pocket. Going upstate for the birds in the morning. Season opens, you know."

Two waiters wearing coats with side pockets conferred quickly with the fat bartender. A drunk customer mumbled and pointed. The other customers faced around, but Burke sat down at a table and beckoned to a waiter.

"Toddy," he said. "Hot, with cinnamon."

He ignored the waiter's narrowed eyes on the shotgun. The waiter swallowed a couple of times and went after the toddy. Something ought to be done about it, the waiter was thinking, but he didn't know any more what to do than the ex-pug at the door.

Another man with slick, black hair went through a door at the end of the bar. Burke was busily rubbing the mud off the blue, hand-tooled shotgun with an oily rag. Presently his drink came and he sipped at it. The mumbling drunk had had enough liquor to have intuition.

" 'Tain't right," he muttered to a slack-mouthed woman. "Come on, baby, we're gettin' outta here. It's too funny to be funny."

Burke was aware he might have been followed here. He had been closely shadowed ever since he had left the apartment where the dead man probably was still sitting. The men who had followed him didn't know the man was dead, for they had been only street shadows when he had entered and left the apartment building.

A man equipped with big muscles came from the door by the bar and a diamond flashed on his little finger as he leaned nonchalantly for a moment on the mahogany. He talked a minute with the bartender and permitted his little black eyes to stray to Burke's table.

Burke guessed Silky Stevens did not identify him. Perhaps he had never seen George Burke, the cashier. Silky nodded and smiled a little at the spectacle of a customer openly cleaning a gun at one of his tables. Two waiters replied to the nod, but they didn't smile.

Other customers went on with their drinking, eyes only flashing now and then to the man with the gun. Hell, they thought, the spattered hunter was too damned casual to mean anything. Burke downed the last of a steaming toddy.

Then he arose cradled the light fowling piece carefully over his left arm, and started toward the exit door. He paused, rubbed his long chin with the back of one hand and turned. The waiters, the doorman and two other hard-eyed men were breathing easier now.

Burke walked straight toward Silky's office door then. That wasn't a common thing for a stranger to do in the Red Roller. But only one man soft-footed to his side before he reached the door. The customers were stirring at the tables. They weren't so sure now that this didn't mean anything.

THE man came beside Burke and his hand in his side pocket was roughly suggestive.

"Wait a minute, you!" he snapped. "Where you goin'?"

Burke's mild eyes showed bland surprise.

"Why, I wish to speak to Mr. Stevens about his hunting farm upstate," he said. "I thought perhaps he might permit me to have a go at a few birds. He has the best cover in the country."

The bouncer-bodyguard of the person of Silky Stevens shook his head dazedly and swallowed hard.

"He ain't got no--" he began, then he changed it. "That's right, I've heard him mention it. But maybe he don't want to see you, mister."

"Surely, he will see me," said Burke patiently. "A friend of his, James Foster, the bank president, said Mr. Stevens was a good fellow and--"

The guard's whole body stiffened suddenly. The thing in his pocket abruptly jabbed hard into Burke's ribs.

"Okay! Okay!" he said icily. "You'll see him, brother. But I'll take care of that shotgun."

"Why, yes, certainly," agreed Burke, passing the fowling piece into the guard's hand without hesitation. "You can hold it for me until I talk to Mr. Stevens."

The guard's eyes blinked rapidly. He took the shotgun into one hand.

"Walk on in, mister," he said then.

Silky Stevens sat beside the single desk in the room. Two other men lounged over at one side. Silky looked up with sleepy black eyes.

"Well, what is it, Card?" he demanded.

"This fella wants to see you about some huntin', Silky," said the guard. "I took his gun because--"

"Sure, Card," said Silky softly. "Put it on my desk. H'm! Nice piece of work."

Silky's hand went out and his fat fingers rubbed along the hand-tooled barrel. He smiled with his mouth at Burke, but his eyes did not smile.

The guard leaned closer to Silky. Burke didn't hear all he said, but the name "Foster" could be seen on his thick lips. Silky Stevens showed no reaction outwardly, but his eyes studied Burke more intently now.

Silky waved the guard to one side. The man joined the other two at the side of the room, thus placing the three partly behind Burke.

"Sit down," Silky said. "Have a cigar, Mr--?"

"Burke's the name and--"

The phone on Silky's desk buzzed softly. Silky reached for it. So, Burke decided, he had been followed from the dead man's apartment. No time now for preliminaries and Burke hadn't intended any.

"Don't touch that phone, Silky!" he snapped. "You other punks, get 'em up! It's a holdup! I said, up!"

Three gasping mugs saw a hand move faster than light. A neat, blue automatic came from under Burke's tan hunting coat. The guard who had taken his shotgun swore over his stupid oversight. Then he made an instant move to correct it. His hand dived into his pocket and stayed there.

FIRE leaped at him from Burke's hand. The mug knew then what it felt like to have a leaden slug pound into a man's vitals. He didn't feel it long, for he was dead when he toppled over. Another of the three had been trying to crab sideways. But his hands were up.

"Drop your rods one at a time, or you get it, too!" commanded Burke.

He was all the way around now, his back presented to Silky, Silky Stevens who wouldn't have a gun about his person since he took a rap up the river because of one. Burke heard feet scuffling as customers milled about excitedly in the room outside.

Still he heard no movement behind him. Then he started, as if to turn slowly toward Silky. One guard whipped a hand downward. But Burke had not turned all the way. A slug jumped from the automatic and made a neat slicing wound in the mug's throat. The guard looked surprised and sat down, dead.

Burke heard the shotgun scrape across Silky's desk, but he started walking toward the remaining guard, anyway. "I'll take your rod, fellow!" he said tersely. "It might be unlucky for you, too."

Burke knew now that Silky had a gun. He could almost feel the hand-tooled barrel of the fowling piece centered upon his back. He knew the instant when Silky's forefinger was tightening on the trigger. Silky had never possessed a gun of his own since that rap up the river. Silky was about to kill a man with the man's own gun.

Burke fired his next shot deliberately, cold-bloodedly, adding up all of several events until they came to the dead man sitting at a table in his apartment. The score came to justified murder.

Until Silky Stevens pulled the trigger Time passed with dragging slowness for Burke. But in only one swift second, all hell erupted.

It came with a detonating, bursting blast of splitting steel and smoking, gaseous flame. A tearing piece of metal went into Burke's shoulder. His back tingled as if it were bare and the coat had been blown off of it.

The hand-tooled forward half of the fowling piece hit the rug and slid past Burke's feet to jam into the wall. Burke now slowly turned around.

Silky Stevens must have sat down heavily in his chair. But he did not know about that though. Where his face had been was only the bare, crushed frontal bones of his skull. The hands that had not used a rod in the years since that rap were no longer on the bleeding dead arms hanging inertly at his sides.

The phone was shattered, and lay on the floor. Burke knew the police soon would come. Two waiters with drawn guns appeared in the opening door. But they gaped and mumbled, and they suddenly decided to go away before the police arrived.

\* \* \* \*

"You say James Foster was cleaning his revolver when an old cartridge exploded?" said Inspector Monahan.

George Burke nodded.

"It looked that way to me, Mr. Monahan," he said. "His daughter, my wife, was up in the country. Foster had the short gun and the oiled rag in his hand when I found him. I knew he had been desperately worried over threats that came from Silky Stevens."

"So you started on the hunting trip, and dropped in to have a word with Silky, is that it, Mr. Burke?"

"That was it, Inspector," stated Burke in a mild voice. "I had dropped my fowling piece in the mud. Perhaps some got into the barrel and I hadn't noticed. When I mentioned Foster's name, Silky's boys decided to get rough. I was compelled to defend myself."

"And the wounds from the bursting shotgun are convincing proof that Silky tried shooting you in the back, Mr. Burke," said Monahan slowly. "But what about the matter of the threat, Mr. Burke?" he added. "The motive for Foster planning--well, cleaning his revolver?"

"I believe Silky Stevens threatened to kidnap Foster's daughter," said Burke. "That was mainly why I dropped in to speak to Silky."

"And gave him a gun," said Monahan thoughtfully. "That shell made one helluva blast."

"Smokeless powder *is* powerful, Inspector," said Burke. But not one-tenth as destructive as the nitro poured into the magazine under the choked and exploding shell, he said to himself. "Yes, I gave him a gun," added Burke, aloud.

## Guiltless Murder By Robert R. Mill



"First Mr. Vonk will assure himself of his son's safety."

"JUST what, if anything, do you know about Java?"

The Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, United States Department of Justice, turned to face the man sitting on the other side of the desk as he asked the question.

A slow smile played over the thin, rather handsome face of Special Agent James Ashby, whose elegance of appearance and manner had earned him the nickname of "Duke."

"That won't take long, sir. Java is an island in the Dutch East India group. The people belong to the Malay race. They raise coffee there. The climate is

tropical. All of which represents about the sum of my knowledge."

He paused to accept a cigarette the other man offered.

"One night, about a year ago," he continued, "I was dining in the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco. At a table near by sat a Dutch planter from Java and his wife. He was heavy, stolid, the typical Dutch Colonial; and, so I was told, wealthy enough to buy the hotel and a bit of the Golden Gate in the bargain. His wife was small, dainty and her features were really exquisite. I fear I showed my interest to the point of rudeness.... Am I going to Java, sir?"

The Director returned his smile.

"No. Java is a bit out of our jurisdiction." He fumbled with some papers on his desk. "But you are going to San Francisco."

Duke Ashby masked his surprise.

"There," continued the Director, "you will meet the steamship *Neptala* due in from the Orient on a world-cruise. You will sail aboard her, through the Canal, and to New York. Outward-bound from there to Europe, you will leave with the pilot off Sandy Hook."

"Yes, sir."

"Aboard the *Neptala*," the Director went on, "will be one J. P. Vonk, a Dutch planter from Java, bound for his old home in the Netherlands after an absence of seven years. His wife is with him."

The Director's eyes twinkled.

"Mr. Vonk evidently shared the partiality shown by you and your other Dutch friend for Malay women, for Mrs. Vonk is a native of Java. And their nurse is a member of the same race. But that is aside from the point.

"The fourth, and from our standpoint, most important member of the party is the fifteen-months'-old son of Mr. and Mrs. Vonk. We brag about our copper heiresses and pork heirs, but I'll venture to state that in all the United

States there isn't a youngster with a fortune waiting for him that even approximates the sum that some day will be turned over to little Peter Vonk."

"Most Dutch planters in Java are wealthy," Ashby interposed.

"Mr. Vonk," declared the "Director, "is about the wealthiest of the lot. And right now he is the most worried."

"Yes sir."

"Just before he started on this voyage he received word from at least four different sources that his son would be dead before he reached Holland."

Ashby leaned forward.

"Kidnap threats, sir?"

"Yes, and no. The threats, which were delivered in varying ways, bore earmarks which might have made them the work of some secret society among the natives, with branches all over the world, or an international gang of kidnapers that has selected as its victim about the richest child in the world."

The Director glanced at his papers again. "Mr. Vonk was frantic. There had been no demand for money, but he at once offered a preventative ransom that would convince some of our very best kidnap artists they have attempted to sell their birthrights for sorry messes of porridge. No answer has been received up to this time."

Ashby drew a pattern on the floor with the tip of a faultless English brogue.

"This might rule out kidnaping," continued the Director, "and suggest a revenge motive, probably the work of natives with a real or fancied wrong. Again, the delay may be part of a careful plan, designed to bring out just the belief I first outlined, while the kidnapers wait to strike until they are in a familiar and favorable territory."

The Director's smile was grim.

"Despite some costly lessons, it is not improbable the belief persists that the United States answers that description."

He pushed the papers aside.

"At any rate," he continued, "Mr. Vonk regards the threats very seriously. The Dutch government shares his view. I had a call from the Ambassador of the Netherlands. They have taken their own precautions, and my knowledge of Dutch thoroughness and efficiency prompts the belief they will do a splendid job. Nevertheless, they have asked us to sit in on the game while the ship is in American ports and American waters. Nothing like having an alibi if the worst should happen."

His face was grim.

"That is why I am determined nothing shall happen. Any questions?"

"Yes sir. Just how did Mr. Vonk make his money?"

"Diversified crops. But the bulk of his fortune, so the Ambassador told me, was made from his vast groves of cinchona trees. Quinine, of course. The whole thing is rather vague in my mind, and I was afraid it might be a touchy subject with our friend from the Embassy, but I recall that the Dutch planters of Java had a neat corner in the drug. They raised prices at will. Then, I believe, the League of Nations' stepped in. A little later German chemists produced a synthetic product--but not before Mr. Vonk, the head of the Java combine, had rolled up one of the greatest fortunes in the world."

"I SEE, sir." Ashby leaned forward, and consulted the papers on the desk. "The *Neptala* docks in San Francisco in four days. Airplane job, sir?"

The Director nodded.

"That way you can make it, and with time to burn. And in the meantime--"

Duke Ashby stood up.

"Right now, sir, I am headed for the State Department. About all I know about Java is that its women are exquisite. Might not hurt to enlarge my knowledge."

The Director nodded with approval.

"Sound idea." A thought came to him. "See Grady. He knows all the Malay countries backward. Bit of a nut on studying rare and far from delightful tropical diseases, upon which he rambles on and on, but when they are exhausted he will give you what you want."

Ashby smiled. "I am willing to listen to anything about Java, sir."

DANGER seemed very remote as the *Neptala*, a stout Dutch ship, designed for service in the tropics, pursued her appointed course. She was running south through the Pacific when Ashby first talked with Vonk.

They met, apparently by accident, in the Captain's quarters. The mariner, after a few commonplace words, retired, leaving them alone in the cabin.

"You are young," was Vonk's first statement.

Ashby smiled, but made no reply, as he continued to study the planter, Vonk, he decided, was in his late forties or early fifties. He was lean, tanned, full of nervous energy, and quite the reverse of the conventional picture of the phlegmatic Dutchman. His sharp features gave a hint of power and ruthlessness.

"I said that you are young," Vonk repeated, in his perfect but somewhat stilted English.

"But that is not what you wished to discuss with me."

Vonk's eyes narrowed.

"No," he admitted. "There are more important things. First, you must understand the location of my quarters--"

"The veranda suite on the promenade deck," Ashby interrupted.

Vonk's voice was cold:

"I gave orders that you and the others were not to attract attention by appearing in that section of the ship, and--"

"I studied the cabin plans," interposed Ashby.

Vonk appeared slightly mollified.

"Very well. Now about the others."

Ashby was smiling.

"A stout gentleman in first class," he supplied, "who gives a very convincing imitation of a bank official bound home for a holiday. The writing chap in second. In third class, we have--"

"My orders were that you were to make no attempt to contact them. You were to operate independently of them. It was not necessary--"

Ashby's voice was as cold as that of the planter.

"Those orders have been followed, Mr. Vonk."

The penetrating glance of the planter was upon the special agent.

"Then how did you know them? They are stupid, yes?"

Ashby apparently was unruffled,

"They are not stupid. They play their parts well. But I, knowing they were here, would be stupid if I was unable to spot them by using a process of elimination."

Vonk nodded.

"That is true." Behind his yellow mask of a face an inward struggle was raging. Ashby remained silent, and allowed the planter to reach a decision.

"We did not get off to an auspicious start. Perhaps the fault is mine." He glanced at a card the special agent had given him. "Mr. Ashby, my remark about your age was rude. I can only ask you to believe my rudeness was prompted by my fears and my worries."

Ashby started to speak, but an upraised hand checked him.

"We must begin again, and on a different basis. Here, confronted with something that means more than my own life, I am helpless. I must cease to give orders. I must throw myself on your mercy, and make use of your specialized knowledge. I must--"

He continued to speak, stripping himself of his pride.

There was no denying his sincerity.

Duke Ashby stemmed the flow of words.

"Mr. Vonk, tonight you must sleep. You are near the breaking-point."

He was standing, bracing himself against the motion of the ship, and presenting a picture of calm confidence.

"I have been through things like this many times. It never has been my duty to tell parents their child was lost to them. Please God, it never will."

Vonk was standing beside him. His brown hand found the comparatively white hand of the special agent.

"Tonight I shall sleep; but first I must answer any questions you care to ask."

The veranda suite, as Ashby had deduced from the plans, was virtually an entire section of the ship, isolated from other passengers. Stout Dutch

sailors, men chosen by the captain, and vouched for by him, guarded both approaches day and night. All necessary service was performed by members of the crew also chosen by the captain. There were no other contacts.

The nurse?

Vonk asserted confidently:

"My wife knew her for years; she was chosen before Peter was born. She loves the child blindly. I think she would give her life for him. Incidentally, she renounced Mohammedanism and has embraced Christianity. Her one fault is that she is perhaps a bit too devout." Then, with the tolerance of the Dutch colonial: "But that is to be expected."

"Quite so," said Ashby. "And the threats: Have there been any since the ship sailed?"

Vonk said there had been none.

Ashby hesitated. Then, perhaps, thousands of miles separated this Dutch child from the perils his father dreaded. The fear of the man became less plausible, almost ridiculous. Then the special agent glanced at the man at his side. Vonk was no weakling, to be terrorized by vague threats. Unstrung though he was, his courage was apparent. That had been proven by his residence in a fever-infested land. He was not swayed by fanciful things. His financial success gave testimony to that.

VONK, apparently sensing Ashby's thoughts, said:

"There is nothing tangible. To all intents and purposes that terror may have been left behind on the other side of the world. But--"

He hesitated, then shot the question:

"Do you believe it is possible for a man to be psychic?"

"Yes," said Ashby shortly.

"So! I have a feeling--it has become a conviction--that the danger to my son increases as we near New York. If this thing strikes, it will be there."

Ashby nodded.

"If there has to be a showdown, I would prefer to have it there. We are taught to depend a great deal on our organization. Here, I feel at a disadvantage, knowing it cannot help. New York is home ground. But I hope you are wrong, Mr. Vonk."

The planter shook his head.

"I am right. You will see."

ASHBY paused in the doorway of the cabin.

"How were these threats received?"

"Always in the same way. I would find a note, impaled with a kris. Always the message was the same: 'Your son will not live to reach Holland.' "

"What language was used?"

"One note was in Dutch. Another in English. Two were in the language of the natives, but these were in different dialects. The Madurese live in the eastern part of the island, and the Sudanese in the west. Their tongues differ."

"And the handwriting?"

"The notes were printed, but I believe they were the work of the same man. The experts agreed."

"You have the notes?"

"No. The authorities kept them."

"Where were the notes received?"

"At various places, as I made business trips around the island."

"None at your home?"

"None."

"That," said Ashby, "would tend to rule out servants."

"Exactly."

"I suppose your estate is vast and well protected?"

"You are correct, Mr. Ashby."

Ashby thought aloud:

"That explains why none of the threats reached you at home."

"Exactly," Vonk admitted. "It also explains why they plan to strike on this voyage, when I no longer am surrounded by that protection."

Ashby made his voice casual:

"Have any idea who might hate you enough to go through with anything like this?"

Vonk's smile was bitter.

"When a man succeeds, he makes enemies. There are many men who have no reason to wish me well. That is business. Business is cruel at best, and doubly so where even life is a battle. But I would not be honest if I singled out any ill-wisher who might go this far."

Irony crept into his smile. "My enemies are what the world calls honorable men."

"Natives?"

Vonk's face softened.

"I wouldn't know why. I am known as a fair master. I understand them, and like them."

Ashby nodded.

"You have been through all this before with your own officials, Mr. Vonk. I must not detain you longer. Remember my instructions: you must sleep. Get something from the doctor, if that is necessary. Good night."

Vonk extended his hand.

"Good night, Mr. Ashby. I think I shall sleep. You have given me confidence that is better than a doctor's powders."

THE *Neptala* headed in toward the coast and began her leisurely passage of the Panama Canal one sunny day at noon. That evening, when Duke Ashby went to his cabin to dress for dinner, he came to an abrupt halt in the passageway.

Stuck in the door of the cabin was a Malay kris. Impaled on the blade of the weapon was a piece of paper.

Ashby glanced about, saw that the passageway was deserted, and then removed the dagger from the wood, taking care not to touch the hilt. Then he entered the cabin, bolted the door, and examined his find.

The note, which was in English, was crudely printed:

"Leave ship at Colon or Havana and save face. You can't prevent what must happen. If you loved justice you would not try."

He put the note aside, and went to work upon the hilt of the kris, dusting it with black powder which he took from a kit. He bent over it anxiously. Not a trace of a fingerprint. The note came next. The result was the same.

Ashby's face wore a worried frown. This was not the work of an ignorant Malay fanatic. The man was clever.

The special agent pressed a button on the wall, and when the steward answered, directed him to request the purser to come to the cabin. When that official appeared, they went over the passenger list, although they had done that at least four times before. Nothing the purser told him threw any light upon the problem. The frown remained as Ashby dressed, and made his way forward to the dining-saloon....

The stay at Colon was brief. Then the *Neptala* was at sea again, plowing her way through the Caribbean, Havana-bound.

The voyage was uneventful. There were no more notes, and no alarms of any kind--only the routine life on shipboard.

Ashby prowled about the ship. Passengers and crew came under his keen glance. There were at least a dozen Malays in third class. There were other passengers who attracted his attention. But it was a hopeless task. He performed it only because he was unwilling to leave any stone unturned.

Then he concentrated upon a search for weak points in the guard that was kept over the Vonk suite. He found only one. Every afternoon when the weather was fine the nurse took the boy upon the private veranda deck outside the cabins for an airing. Vonk and his wife were not in sight.

It seemed safe enough. Barriers kept the other passengers at some distance. Only the knowledge that planned attacks are based upon the regular habits

of the victims caused Ashby to believe that the danger, if it did strike, would come at this point. So he prepared to meet it.

Aft of the private deck, and at a slightly lower level, was a sports deck, used by first class. It was only a few feet from the private deck. The windows there were invariably lowered to permit a greater circulation of air.

Ashby found a place behind a ventilator which commanded a view of the private deck, and had his chair placed there. Outwardly, he was engrossed with a book, while all about him fellow passengers were playing deck games, chatting or indulging in short naps. In reality, he was following every move of the nurse and her charge.

The nurse appeared to be an intelligent and kindly girl. It was obvious that little Peter was devoted to her. Her every move showed that she returned that devotion. Ashby smiled with amusement as the youngster, tired of toddling about, extended his arms, and was taken into the arms of the girl, who walked back and forth with him.

Ashby glanced about for possible danger spots. Looking aft, a rail marked the end of the sport deck. Below it was a cargo deck, in which the after mast was mounted. Aft of the cargo deck, at the stern of the vessel, was superstructure, in which the third-class passengers were accommodated. The top deck on the superstructure was on a level with the sport deck, and passengers promenaded about it, in plain view of the occupants of the sport deck, and also visible to the persons on the private deck outside the Vonk suite.

The special agent noticed that a considerable distance separated the superstructure and the private deck.

"Too far for accurate shooting," he mused. But he moved his chair so that it formed a barrier. And he carefully scrutinized the third-class passengers who were moving about.

ALL this, however, had failed to yield results when, on a hot, sultry morning, the *Neptala* passed old Morro Castle and tied up in Havana. She remained at the pier all day, and during that time Duke Ashby never relaxed his vigilance.

The majority of the passengers went ashore to sample the delights of gay Havana. There was no liberty for the crew, for the ship took on coal and supplies. Mr. and Mrs. Vonk remained in their suite, and the guard of sailors was not withdrawn.

Ashby heaved a sigh of relief that evening when he heard officers shouting commands in guttural Dutch, and felt the ship get under way. He waited until the pilot was dropped, and then turned in. Two hours later he was up to prowl about looking for something which he admitted he would be unlikely to recognize if he encountered it.

THE following day found the *Neptala* surrounded by, and carried along in, those bluest of waters that are known as the Gulf Stream. Mild trade winds were blowing. Gulls circled the vessel, and schools of fish were visible.

The morning passed without event. Luncheon, with substantial Dutch food, was not a thing to be treated lightly, and Ashby felt sluggish and sleepy as he resumed his vigil on the sports deck. He read a bit, closed his eyes, and then fought back to wakefulness.

Fifteen minutes went by as he declined the invitation of two girls to take part in a deck-tennis tournament. He resumed his reading, and by means of sidewise glances saw that the private deck outside the Vonk suite was deserted.

Aft, on the third-class promenade deck, four or five persons were getting in a bit of exercise after luncheon.

Mechanically, Ashby catalogued these persons in his mind:

A girl, probably the maid of one of the passengers.... A youth, who looked as if he might be a mechanic.... A Chinese, who paused at the rail to stare at the distant horizon with unblinking almond-shaped eyes.... A man of mixed race, probably some sort of Eurasian, and evidently a priest or holy man, who walked to and fro with an open book in his hands, and whose lips moved as he read aloud.

There was nothing about any of them to hold the attention of the special agent, and his glance returned to the private deck. The nurse and little Peter had appeared. Using his book as a shield, Ashby watched them closely.

The nurse was carrying the child in her arms as she walked to and fro on the private deck. She was out of Ashby's range of vision when she reached the forward limit of the space. She was comparatively close when she returned to the after boundary of glass windows, all of which were open.

WITH a start of surprise, Ashby stiffened in his chair. The girl's lips were moving, but if any sound came from them it was not audible. Her glance--it was a fixed stare--was trained upon the stern of the vessel.

The special agent turned to follow that glance. At the forward end of the third-class promenade, stood the Eurasian. The book was cradled in his arms. He was leaning forward over the rail, and his steady, almost hypnotic gaze was directed at the nurse.

A cold chill passed over Ashby. He watched the nurse and the man continue their duel of glances. Something snapped in the mind of the special agent. This was the menace he had been sent to fight. He must get to that menace before it had a chance to strike!

He slipped from the chair without standing erect. He was below the level of the two principals in the strange drama, and his cautious move passed unnoticed.

Dodging behind a ventilator, he made his way to the opposite, or port side of the deck. There he dropped to the cargo deck, and began to make his way aft. He looked up, and saw the Eurasian still standing at the rail, still training his hypnotic glance upon the nurse.

Ashby darted toward him. The man pressed the book tight against his breast. He was smiling, a smile in which hate and triumph blended. The special agent quickened his stride. The Eurasian's hands fell away from his breast. He held the book as a man would carry logs to a fireplace. Both arms swept out in a swinging motion. The book sailed into space, and then dropped into the sea.

EVEN before the book left the man's hands, sharp fear and disappointment stabbed at Ashby's heart. Now he knew what this menace was! Fragments from the conversation he had held with Grady in the State Department fitted into place. He had been blind. The thing had happened before his very eyes, but he had failed to see it. He had been drawn away from the spot where he was needed most.

Ashby wheeled abruptly, intending to race back to the private deck. His foot caught in a rope attached to a cargo boom of the after mast, and he fell headlong. Even as he fell, he knew that he had failed completely, that he was too late.

"Man overboard!" rose the cry, from forward.

The special agent, struggling to his feet, heard in it only a verification of what he knew had happened; a tragedy, hidden from his sight, but one he was as familiar with as if he had witnessed it.

Now Ashby was on his feet, a trifle dazed by the hard fall, but lurching toward the starboard rail to risk his own life in an attempt to undo what he felt he had permitted to happen. But even before he reached the rail, a blue-clad figure appeared ahead of him and without hesitation leaped away from

the ship. The special agent saw a second blue-clad figure dive from the sport deck above. Gallant Dutch sailors were going to the rescue.

Ashby pulled up abruptly. The siren of the *Neptala* sounded. A bell clanged. The pulsing of the engines ceased. A whistle sounded, an officer roared an order, and the davits creaked as a small boat was lowered away.

The special agent retraced his steps, and headed toward the superstructure at the stern. Above him, the Eurasian stood at the rail, calmly watching the efforts of the two sailors and the boat to reach a dot that had appeared on the surface of the ocean, disappeared from sight, reappeared, then vanished again.

Ashby mounted an iron ladder. He gained the deck. Blind anger surged through him as he rushed toward the man standing at the rail.

The Eurasian turned to face him. He was smiling with triumph and confidence. For just a second he lost his composure before Ashby's rage. Then he recovered.

"You want me?" All the calm of the Orient was at his command, and he was making use of it. "I have done nothing. I throw a book into the sea. That is not a crime."

Ashby stood beside him, his fists clenching and opening.

"If that baby dies," his voice was low and ominous, "you are guilty of murder just as surely as if you had tossed him overboard."

The man's smile was mocking.

"You prove that? You make a jury believe? Ah, I see. You will attempt to prove hypnotism. You, a member of an enlightened race--"

"Shut up!" Ashby ordered. His hands darted out, and played over the form of the man. He was unarmed.

"Not hypnotism," Ashby declared. He was groping in his mind for a word. It was an unusual word that Grady had used. "Something that doctors know

and recognize." The word came. He, shouted it at the man before him:

"Lata!"

The Eurasian cringed. Ashby seized him by the collar.

"Come along."

AS they made their way forward and topside, a cheer went up from the passengers lining the rail.

"They have him!"

They passed the first officer. He fell into step beside Ashby and his prisoner. Seeing the anxiety on Ashby's face, he said:

"The baby will be all right, yes. The doctor is in the boat."

They entered the Captain's quarters. A Dutch detective, working through an interpreter, questioned the weeping nurse.

"Why did you do it?"

The interpreter talked with her, and turned to the detective:

"She says she does not know."

The detective advanced toward the nurse.

"Just a moment," Ashby spoke in a low tone. "She is innocent." He produced cigarettes. "Suppose we wait for Mr. Vonk. First, he will assure himself of his son's safety, but then he will be here."

They waited. The Eurasian tried to speak, but was silenced by Ashby.

Then Vonk entered, shaking with emotion.

"My son--Peter--is safe. God sent a sailor to perform a miracle. Those men, Captain, I must reward--"

He saw the nurse.

He spoke to her in dialect, his voice deep with anger and reproach.

"Just a moment, Mr. Vonk." Ashby's calm voice silenced the planter. "This woman is innocent. She is ill. She needs sympathy and medical treatment."

He was standing beside the planter.

"This woman is afflicted with a disease known as *lata*. When she suffers one of the attacks, she is powerless and will imitate any action."

He turned to his prisoner.

"This man knew of her illness, and planned to use it to accomplish his purpose. He attracted her attention, and threw a book into the sea. She was holding the child, and, in the grip of the disease, she followed his example."

The Captain nodded.

"I have heard of that," he said.

"Yes," said Vonk. "In Java, we hear vague reports of something of the sort. But you, an American, thousands of miles away, how do--"

Ashby brushed that aside.

"I deserve no credit. As a matter of routine, I obtained what information I could about Java when I received this assignment. An expert in our State Department told me that and many other things. I failed. I saw this being done before my eyes, but did not sense what was happening. I could have saved your son. Instead, he is alive because of the courage of those sailors."

He wheeled upon the Eurasian.

"Why did you do this?"

THE man's eyes were blazing with hate as he glared at Vonk.

"You killed my brother. You killed my father. They died with malaria because your quinine cost so much they could not buy. I made a vow that your son--"

"That's enough," snapped Ashby. He turned to the detective. "This is a Dutch ship upon the high seas, so he is your prisoner."

The detective nodded, and prepared to depart with his prisoner.

"This woman needs care," said the Captain. "She tried to throw herself overboard."

Ashby nodded with sympathy.

"Turn her over to your doctor, Captain. As you say, she needs care."

VONK stepped forward, his fingers fumbling for a pocket checkbook.

"She shall have the best of care. I am a man who has been relieved of a burden too heavy for him to carry. I shall insist upon sharing my happiness with all you who have helped me." He turned to Duke Ashby. "You, my friend, despite your modesty--"

"No, thank you." Ashby's voice was icy. "I am glad your son is alive." He flicked a spot of dust from his immaculate coat. "As a member of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, I am not allowed to accept rewards." He apparently failed to see the hand which Vonk had extended. "As a private citizen, tips hardly interest me. Give my share to the fund for the widows and orphans of Dutch seamen. The courage of such seamen will justify the acceptance of quinine-trust money."

He addressed the Captain:

"With your permission, sir, I shall visit the fore-castle and shake hands with two gallant gentlemen."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Lata*, or *Latah*, as it is known in Java, is a form of *palms*, a disease of the nervous system, in which religious emotionalism plays a part. In his textbook, "The Practice of Medicine," Dr. James Tyson says of this disease: "An endemic-neurosis, the subjects of which are liable, on any sudden emotion, to jump violently and utter a loud cry or sound, and obey any command or imitate any action without regard to its nature."

The disease is not peculiar to Java alone. Dr. Tyson cites as examples the "jumping Frenchman" of Canada, the "Jerkers" in Kentucky, the "Holy Rollers" in New Hampshire and Vermont, and the American "jumpers."

Dr. Tyson makes no mention of the fact, but the author learned from other sources that the criminal records of Batavia, Java, include the conviction on a charge of murder of a man who, knowing a woman was afflicted with *lata*, caused her to throw a child into a river, (where it drowned), by making a motion which she imitated.

## **A Pearl Of Price By Raymond S. Spears.**

FRED MEALIN was tonging for button-shells at the Wittsburg Ford, on the St. Francis River, when he raked up a shell of large size and unusual shape. It was light in color, with something of the shape of a butterfly-wing, and weighing about seventeen ounces. The fisher turned it over in his hands, and tossed it into the stern of his scow for later examination. Then he continued his tonging, little thinking that the shell which he handled so carelessly held within it a whole Pandora's box of trouble.

Singing as he worked, Mealin gathered in his stint of fifteen hundredweight of mussel-shells, and then hoisted his anchors to let the green current carry him down stream to his boiling-pan and tent. At the landing he shoveled the shells into the pan, built a fire under it, and then built another fire in his cook-stove. At this point he recalled the butterfly-shell, and brought it up to the tent, where a minute's contact with the stove opened wide the bivalve's shell. Within was a pale meat. The pearler poked into the mass with his knife, and far under it, next to the hinge of the shell, he found something hard and movable.

"A slug, I reckon!" he muttered.

Wrenching open the shell, he plucked out the meat, and found, beneath it, what made him spring to his feet and gasp. It was a round pearl, as large as the end of his thumb. He seized it between thumb and finger, sprang to the tent-flap, and let the sun shine upon the jewel. It was the color of a rose, and within was a tiny flame of fire, which played from side to side as he rolled it across his palm, looking fearfully for the flaw that makes the difference between slugs and pearls of great price.

"My lan'! My lan'!" he gasped to himself. "I never yearn of sech a trick as that! Two thousan' dollars!"

He shrank back into the tent, lest the forest of gum and cypress on the opposite side of the river might have prying eyes in it. He tied down the

flap of his tent, drew his rusty revolver from his old trunk, and turned the cylinder to see that it would still shoot. He looked for a place to put the pearl, but neither the trunk nor the ground nor a pocket seemed safe. He finally sewed it up in a little sack, and slung it next to his skin.

He thought of starting instantly for Memphis, to sell his find, but native thrift held him back. What could he do with his tent, which cost thirty dollars, with his pile of shells, worth forty, and with his outfit of scow, tongs, lines, and pan, worth perhaps fifteen? These he could not leave.

That afternoon he cleaned his catch of shells, and the next morning paddled down to the Long Stillwater, where the shell-buyers congregated. Here he told what he had to sell--how many tons of shells he had, and where they were. A buyer bid them in for thirty-nine dollars, and went up with a gasoline launch and shell-barge to get them. Night found the pearler sold out, shells, tent, pan, and all, for shell-buyers do a little trade in supplies on the side.

"Going out of business?" the buyer said. "Found a big un?"

"No--no! " Mealin gasped, afraid some one would guess his secret.

The buyer read the truth.

"Let's see it--come now!" he urged. "Mebbe I can tell you what you'd ought to git for it."

Mealin, knowing his own ignorance, saw the sense of this, and showed his pearl to the buyer.

"Gracious!" the man exclaimed, reaching toward it, but the finder slipped it back into the little pouch. "It's worth thousands!"

Mealin returned to the Stillwater, and there bought a skiff to go down the river to Helena. While he was yet in sight of the shell-buyers' headquarters, word that he had made a find had passed to many an ear. In the twilight, two men slipped down the river in a dugout, pursuing. They had heard the pearl was worth ten thousand dollars, and they wanted it.

Bill Brones and Dan Petterson were old Mississippi "river-rats." They knew Mealin, and they believed he was more cowardly than themselves. All that afternoon and evening they drove their paddles deep into the water, in chase of him; and toward midnight, a ripple down a long eddy told them that some one was rowing there. They knew he would not stop for the night, having so much in his possession.

Just ahead, the river entered a long reach of unbroken forest. Miles down in the brake they overtook the man, who had been rowing in a cold sweat, knowing that strangers were sharing the river with him. As they came alongside his boat, he spoke in a trembling voice:

"Evenin', gemmen!"

"Howdy!" they answered, and Mealin turned sharply toward the bank.

"Huh! Where you-all goin'?" they demanded.

"Theh's--theh's a camp yeah!" he answered feebly.

The two knew it was a lie, and they drove their dugout rasping along the side of the skiff. As Mealin sprang to his feet, they seized him and dragged him down. Too late he reached for his revolver--Brones had it, and smashed him in the face with the butt. They went through his pockets, and found his pocketbook with a few soft bills in it. They ran their hands over his clothes seeking the little lump--and found it over his heart. They tore open his clothes and took the treasure. Bill clutched it, and put the string over his own head, uttering a guttural cry of triumph.

They kicked in the thin sides of the skiff, reentered their dugout, and drove on down the stream. Mealin came to at daybreak, and discovered that his pearl was gone, as well as his money. He wasted some tears and curses, and then went back to pearling and shell-fishing. Next day, the two river-pirates hid out in a cane-brake, each watching the other--one guarding against a blow on the head, the other against desertion by his partner, who carried the gem. That night they drove down the St. Francis and entered the Mississippi. Here their dugout was but a fleck upon the vast waters, and when they were below Helena, they knew they were safe from pursuit.

"What'll we do with it?" Petterson asked, awed by the lambent flame within the tiny ball. "Hit's shore a bustin' big un!"

"Sell hit! Sell hit! Ten thousan' dollars!" Bill Brones laughed.

"But whar?" Petterson asked again.

"Vicksburg--Baton Rouge--N'Orleans--anywhar!" the bigger thief laughed, again rubbing the gem in his hands, Petterson reached to take the trinket, but Brones drew back. "Cyar-ful!" he growled menacingly. "You mout drap hit!"

Petterson drew back, his eyes flaring. He was not strong enough to resent his partner's greed openly; but Brones saw his anger, and carefully put the pearl back in the little sack. Thereafter he did not turn his back to Petterson while paddling--in fact, he changed seats, taking the stern himself.

At Modoc Landing they bought some tobacco and food with the money they had stolen with the pearl. Then for two days they paddled and floated ceaselessly, for neither dared sleep. Finally, in Milliken's Bend, Brones perfected a little scheme.

"Hit won't be me killin' 'im!" he said to himself. "I won't be to blame if he cayn't swim out. Hit'll be jes hisn's own keerlessness if he don' git aout!"

It was starlight, and nearing midnight. Over the water a few shreds of fog rolled and flew. On the left the lumping of a caving bank sometimes broke the stillness. Far ahead, the glare of Vicksburg's electric-lights was reflected in the sky.

Brones slipped out of his coat and loosened the laces of his shoes. Then, feeling the little sack under his throat, he leaned to the left and dived slowly into the water, upsetting the canoe as he did so. He swam far under the water, and when he came to the surface at last, he listened for any sound from behind him. He heard nothing and saw nothing.

Quietly he struck across the current, and an hour later landed below the transfer-dock. Standing on the bank, he looked at the river for a long time,

shivering in the coolness. He saw dark objects out on the water, and some of them seemed to have faces and eyes. At length he turned toward the city, and on the water-front he found a welcome in a shanty-boat--Carney Hill's *Klondike*, already known to Brones.

Brones drank liquor to keep himself from catching cold, and the more he drank the more talkative he became. He began to boast that he was a rich man, but when Hill asked him where he got his wealth, he was shrewd enough not to say. He did say, however, that he had come out of the St. Francis. Hill guessed the rest. When Brones was stupefied, the shanty-boater discovered the little sack and saw the gem. He cackled a queer laugh. Replacing the pearl with a musket-ball, he carried Brones up the wharf to a pile of cotton-bales, and there left him asleep.

"I'd oughter kill 'im," Hill thought to himself. "Brones'll shore be plumb mad when he finds his little hunk of sunset turned blue! But he won't know--huh!"

Hill dropped out the mouth of the Yazoo and floated on down the Mississippi. Three weeks later he landed at New Orleans, and went to a little shop up in the French quarter. Here a dapper little Creole asked what did he have to sell now -- candlesticks or plate?

Hill showed the pearl, and the dealer in curios let out an involuntary cry. He touched it, smelt it, rubbed it with his tongue. He offered a hundred dollars--two hundred--five hundred; but Hill laughed easily.

"I want two thousan' dollars for it!" he demanded. "No less!"

The Frenchman had long dealt with river-men. He bought anything from second-hand shanty-boats to jewelry, antiques, and old books. He laughed, gesticulated, and slowly raised his offers until, late in the day, he got up to seventeen hundred and fifty dollars.

"Na mair! Na mair!" he said.

Hill protested, haggled, and threatened to go, but without avail. Finally, he accepted the money in hand, and the pearl was off the Mississippi for good.

The little Frenchman had an interest in a store on Canal Street--a store where there was a mixture of real antiques, trinkets, and curios. It had a few regular customers whom the Frenchman always kept in mind when shanty-boaters came to his other place with the treasures of the river. He thought, now, of a young New York broker, a Mardi Gras visitor, who wanted something novel, something different, every time he came.

The Frenchman had a very pretty bit of gold spinning which had come from down in Guatemala. There were some pretty stones woven into the fabric of gold threads and links, but it needed a pendant larger and better than the Indians had been able to give it. In the beautiful pearl from the St. Francis, the Frenchman had a jewel which exactly suited the strange, shell-like pattern of the gold-weavers. With his own hands he substituted it for a cheaper gem, and one glance showed that he had done well.

A few weeks later, the young man came, looking less young than before, and thinner-jawed, perhaps. The price of the pretty ornament staggered him, but he shrugged his shoulders and paid it. For a minute, he had the supreme joy of seeing pure delight in the eyes of a beautiful girl who was with him; but glancing from the pearl to his face, she seemed to ask a question which he dared not answer.

Two months later, in the same column of a newspaper, the little Frenchman found two paragraphs of personal interest to him. One told of a fight on a shanty-boat in Putney's Bend, in which one Carney Hill, a noted river-junker, had been killed by a river-rat named Brones. Brones, who was arrested, claimed that Hill had robbed him of a valuable pearl. The other item was an account of the suicide of a young New York broker, owing to financial difficulties, and--so rumor said--to the fact that his fiancée had returned his gifts.

"*Hehn!*" the frenchman said to himself. "Ah wondair who get dat pearl now? Two good customair gone in one day! *Hehn*, business is bad!"

## Racket Toll by Frank Gruber.



THE traffic lights turned to red, but the funeral procession exercised its right of custom and continued to roll past the intersection. Jim Strong kept his foot on the accelerator and let his motor purr idly.

Behind him, a horn honked vigorously. Strong muttered under his breath at the callousness of some people. He was utterly unprepared, however, for the action of the impatient driver behind him. As Strong relaxed behind the wheel of his coupe, a motor in low gear whined beside him. Strong turned to look to the left and saw the huge truck whiz past.

He gasped. The truck couldn't possibly force its way through the procession of funeral cars. It would have to make a sharp turn into the side street.

It didn't, though. Even as Strong watched, the huge five-ton truck picked up speed. Strong heard the screams of several persons, the screech as brakes were applied, and then a terrific crash as the truck hit the hearse!

Involuntarily, Strong released his foot from the clutch of his car and the machine, in gear, leaped forward. Frenziedly, Strong stamped on the brake.

He brought the car to an abrupt stop and for safety, turned off the ignition switch. Then he looked again at the scene of the crash and a horrified gasp escaped his lips.

The hearse had been knocked over on its side. The force of the impact had knocked open the loosely fastened rear door and--the coffin was half in the hearse and half on the street!

Strong tore open the door of his coupe and piled out to the street. Horns were blowing everywhere; people were yelling and brakes were screeching on all sides.

Strong started grimly for the truck that had deliberately crashed into the hearse. The truck driver leaned out of his cab and yelled at Strong, "Get your buggy out of the way or I'll back over it!"

"You will like hell!" snarled Strong. "Climb out of that truck. You're under arrest."

"A cop!" yelled the truck driver. "Okay, I'll stop."

The motor of the truck roared deafeningly and the back end suddenly swerved toward Strong. Strong leaped back wildly. The truck missed him by inches.

The truck driver was switching into forward gear again. Strong rushed to the side of the cab as the truck leaped away, turning into the side street. He caught hold of the handrail and leaped to the running board. "Stop this truck, damn you!" he thundered.

The truck driver grinned wickedly and lashed out sideways at Strong's face with his fist. The blow knocked Strong off the running board. He hit the paved street, tried to hold his balance and couldn't. He landed on the street on one hand and knee, bruising both.

He ignored the pain and sprang to his feet. The tail end of the truck was just sweeping past him. Strong lunged for it, missed, then wheeled and ran back

to his coupe. He piled into it, ground down on the starter and in an instant was in pursuit of the truck.

IT had a hundred feet or more start on him, but that didn't matter. In a block or two, Strong would catch up to it. He shifted into second, then high, and plunging his foot down on the accelerator, reached for the Police Positive at his hip.

He shifted the gun to his left hand, then, holding the wheel with his right, shoved his gun hand out the side of the car. He aimed as well as he could and sent a bullet crashing into the rear of the truck. This ought to be signal enough to the truck driver that he meant business.

Clenching his teeth, Jim Strong swerved out to pull up beside the driver. And as he did, a contorted face suddenly raised up from behind the tailboard of the truck. A black automatic appeared beside it--and belched fire.

Strong was caught completely unawares. During the crash back by the funeral procession, and all throughout the altercation between the truck driver and Strong, no one had appeared from the rear of the truck. And now--there was a sharp explosion in the vicinity of the front tire of Strong's coupe and suddenly he had to fight the wheel.

The tire had gone out as he was swerving to the left. His speed was considerable and with only one hand on the wheel, Strong had all he could do for the next second or two to keep the car under control.

He finally wound up against the curb, on the wrong side of the street. By then the truck was more than a block away.

Strong was memorizing the license number of the truck. He climbed out of his car, whipped out a notebook and pencil and wrote down the number.

Then, deserting his coupe with the flat tire, Strong jogged back to the intersection where the hearse had been overturned. An enormous crowd had already collected, and Strong had difficulty in forcing his way through to the center of things. His face was taut and gray when he saw the black-veiled women, heard their wailing. A funeral is a tragic thing in itself. To have the hearse containing the remains of a loved one violently overturned and defiled--that was incredibly cruel.

Then, Strong saw something else--a limp, huddled body lying on the street. The driver of the hearse.

Strong turned away and picked out a man in striped trousers and black-tail coat--the undertaker. He pulled him to one side.

"I'm Detective Sergeant Strong, of the district attorney's office," he said in a low tone. "I saw that truck deliberately ram the hearse. What is it--union trouble?"

THE undertaker's eyes were wide in bewilderment. "No, positively no! My drivers are all union men. He"--he pointed at the dead driver--"had been with me for six years. Anyway, would strikers do a thing like this?"

Strong shook his head. No, men would have to be pretty callous to show such disrespect for the dead. He half turned away. "Who is it--any one of importance?"

The undertaker shrugged. "His name was George Fosdick, a bookkeeper for a manufacturing concern. His widow told me that there was twenty-five hundred insurance. I--I checked up on that. She was right."

Strong's forehead creased. Just an ordinary person of whom there were hundreds of thousands in the city. Bookkeepers do not have gang affiliations, not as a rule. The undertaker claimed he was having no trouble. Why, then, should a pair of ruthless strong-arm men ram a hearse?

The thing wasn't an accident, of that Strong was sure. No one would become so angry at being kept waiting by a funeral procession as to do such a thing. There was some other reason behind the thing.

Uniformed cops were already in command of the situation. They were dispersing the crowds, and the undertaker's drivers were handling the coffin of the deceased. The mourners--Strong didn't feel justified in questioning them now.

He turned and pushed through the crowd. He entered a drug store on the corner and put in a telephone call to the Bureau of Motor Vehicles.

"Sergeant Strong of the D. A.'s office," he said a moment later. "I want the name and address of the owner of the truck containing the following license number."

He repeated the number he had memorized.

There was a pause of a moment or two, then the reply came. "Drot truck, owned by the Volney Candy Co., 1798 North Halsted Street. But the license plates were reported stolen, two days ago."

He made another call to the Emergency Squad of the police department regarding his coupe, then left the drug store and stepped into a taxi parked at the curb. Ten minutes later, Jim Strong entered the district attorney's office.

THE clerk at the desk in the outer office hailed him. "Sergeant Strong, Mr. Murdock was just asking about you. He wants to see you right away."

Strong chewed at his lower lip, then shrugged and went to the D. A.'s office.

"Ah, Strong," the D. A. said when he entered, "I've got a special job for you. Something out of the ordinary. A little while ago a truck deliberately

rammed a hearse in a funeral procession----"

"And some one in the truck sent a bullet into the tire of a car that started in pursuit of it," cut in Strong.

"Eh? How do you know?"

"Because I was in the car. I saw the whole thing."

The D. A. scowled. "Damn! Did any newspapermen get that?"

Strong shrugged. "I couldn't lug the car away. If they're smart, they'll check up on the license. That's what I did about the truck-- and learned it had stolen plates."

"Then we're in for some razzing." The D. A. shook his head. "Every time it gets near election and some one in this department makes a bull, I catch hell in the papers."

"I didn't make a bull," said Strong. "The truck rammed the hearse and started to make a get-away. I chased it, and some one in the back of the truck popped up and sent a bullet into my tire. That's all there was to it."

"But why would any one ram a hearse?" protested the D. A. "The thing's so goofy that the papers will play it up."

"I don't care about the papers," said Strong. "But about the other--I'm going to find out about that. I'm beginning to get ideas about this thing, anyway."

"What is it--another of your rackets?"

"My rackets? They're yours," said Strong. "All I do is bust 'em."

He turned abruptly and left the room. He went straight to his own little office, a place scarcely large enough for a desk, a filing cabinet and a couple of chairs. In the room, however, was the door to another room. The door was kept locked. Even the district attorneys who came and went with the various city administrations had never been past this locked door. It was

Strong's own room. The district attorneys, after they got to know Strong, respected his request for privacy.

STRONG unlocked the room now and went in. The room was heaped high with an amazing conglomeration of articles. There were household appliances, patented can openers, fruit juices, coffee percolators; there were office devices, models of machines, including several of perpetual motion. An entire shelf was heaped high with dusty documents, stocks, bonds and shares--all utterly worthless. They had the same thing in common with the mechanical contrivances. They had been used by some one in a fraud or swindle. And so they had come to Jim Strong's private storeroom.

District attorneys leaving office, said to their successors: "Fire twenty men if you feel you must economize in this office--but keep Jim Strong. The man knows more about rackets than the rest of the department put together. He'll make your job easy."

And here in this room were the results of Strong's twelve years work under several district attorneys. An odd smile played on his lips as he rummaged through the stuff.

After several minutes search he found what he sought, a thick book bound in limp leather and stamped with gold, "Holy Bible." He wiped dust from the book.

The book had been used in a swindle eight years ago. If he remembered right, the "Reverend" Joseph Dumbro was even now free again.

AN hour later Strong parked his coupe, which had had the tire changed, before a dingy two-story frame building on Bissell Street, on the North Side. He picked up the bible from the seat and climbed out of the car.

A moment later he rang the doorbell of the first-floor flat. There was a short wait, then a woman of about thirty-five opened the door. She was dressed in black, and her eyes were red and puffed from weeping.

"Mrs. Fosdick?" Strong asked. "I'd like to see Mr. Fosdick."

The woman winced. "You can't. He's--dead!"

Strong recoiled. "Dead? Mr. Fosdick's dead. Ah--Mrs. Fosdick, I didn't know. I am grieved. Had I known I most certainly would not have called--not now, in your hour of great grief."

Mrs. Fosdick dabbed at her eyes. "I've just come from the cemetery. I--what did you want to see him about?"

Strong cleared his throat. "Why, I'm from the International Bible Society. I--I brought the bible that Mr. Fosdick ordered recently."

"What bible? I didn't know George ordered a bible."

Strong held the book out before him. "Why, this; it's our latest edition, with illustrated pages. It wasn't quite ready when Mr. Fosdick made the deposit on it two weeks ago."

Mrs. Fosdick stiffened. "Deposit? You mean--there's money due on it?"

Strong looked down at the bible. "Why--ah--Mr. Fosdick paid two dollars. There's eighteen due on it."

"Eighteen dollars!" cried Mrs. Fosdick. "What is this--another racket? George wouldn't ever have bought a bible, anymore than he would all that whisky."

Strong pounced on the woman's words. "Whisky--another racket? What do you mean?"

A look of consternation spread across Mrs. Fosdick's face. "I--I'm sorry," she said. "I can't talk any more. Not now."

"But you must," insisted Strong. "The bible was a stall. That's a racket some one pulled years ago. You--some one's tried to pull one on you. I want to know about it. I'm a policeman."

"What?" cried Mrs. Fosdick. "You're a policeman?"

"Yes. I know all about what happened at the funeral. I was there. I used this brutal trick just to get you to talk. Some one's tried to victimize you. I want you to tell me about it."

"No, no!" said Mrs. Fosdick hurriedly. "No one's tried anything. I--I can't say a word. Not--now!" And stepping back, she suddenly slammed the door in Strong's face.

Strong looked at the closed door and sighed. He couldn't force Mrs. Fosdick to talk, not during her bereavement at any rate. Yet he had to get on the trail of the racketeers who had tried to intimidate her, who had killed some one in doing so.

"Just stand right there, copper!" said a harsh voice behind Strong.

Strong groaned aloud. He'd been so intent on getting information from Mrs. Fosdick that he'd neglected entirely to think of his own safety. He should have been more alert, knowing that the men who had rammed the funeral hearse were more than ordinarily bold.

STRONG stood still, facing the closed door. Something hard poked into his spine and a rough hand clawed at his hip pocket where reposed his Police Positive. At the moment the hand pulled at the gun. Strong whirled. He threw himself full force against the man who had the gun in his back, swinging his fist at the same time.

The gun exploded and Strong felt sudden, biting pain along his side. Then his fist connected with flesh and bone and the man with the two guns, including Strong's own, staggered away.

A low growl, starting at the bottom of Strong's throat, died only half born. For there was another man, and even as his partner was reeling away, this man was lunging forward, leather-covered blackjack swishing toward Strong.

Strong tried desperately to dodge the weapon, couldn't quite make it. It smashed along the side of his head, almost ripping his ear loose. It thudded against his shoulder and numbness shot down into his arm.

Strong couldn't stop fighting, though. To do so would have been fatal. He lowered his head and butted the man in the stomach. The man went down and Strong sprawled over him. He rolled off him quickly, shot a look over his left shoulder at the other man, then poised himself to attack.

The man with the two guns was groggy. He was waving them about, trying to aim them at Strong. Strong dived low and hit him just above the knees with his head and shoulders.

He spilled the man to the sidewalk and clawed at his own gun in the thug's right fist. The man, surprisingly, showed strong resistance. He clung to the gun as if his life depended on it--which it did. Strong smashed his right fist into the man's face, but the blow was a weak one because of his partially numbed arm.

He could see the other man getting up from the sidewalk, saw the blackjack descending on him. He threw all he had into snatching the gun from the man, succeeded, and began to whirl.

Then the blackjack exploded on Strong's head. A million tongues of flame shot through Strong's head into his shoulder. He felt himself falling and tried desperately to keep from becoming unconscious. He knew that the gun in his hand thundered, but that was all he knew.

HE was in an ambulance when he awakened. Fingers of pain seemed to search out every nerve in his body with every lurch of the machine.

He opened his eyes and looked up at a grinning, white-coated interne.  
"Good thing your skull's thick," said the interne cheerfully.

Strong put a hand to it. There was a lump as big as a bantam egg where the blackjack had struck him. As he moved, he felt the pain in his side. "How's the bullet wound?" he asked.

"You mean that skin scratch? I put some adhesive tape on that."

Strong sat up. "Then stop the bus and let me off."

"Nix!" exclaimed the interne. "Better come along to the hospital and sleep for a few hours."

"Can't," said Strong. "I've got work to do." He sat up and shook himself. The effort cost him some pain, but he felt better for it.

The interne spoke to the ambulance driver and at the next corner Strong climbed out.

"When does the Globe come out?" he asked a newsboy at a news stand.

"She's out," replied the boy. "Five minutes ago."

Strong bought a copy and, moving to the side of a drug store, opened the paper to the "Funeral Notices." He read with a pencil in hand and checked several of the notices. Three minutes later, he climbed into a taxi.

"No. 1961 Orchard Street," he told the driver.

The cab turned into Wells Street, zoomed north to Amitage Avenue, then west a half mile to Orchard. It pulled up at an ancient, frame building. Strong paid the driver. "If you should happen to be around the corner on Amitage in five or ten minutes, I might have another ride for you," he told the cabby.

"I'll wait here," the man said eagerly.

"No, I'd rather you didn't. Park around the corner."

There was purple undertaker's crepe fastened to the door of the house. Strong rang the doorbell. A moment later a middle-aged woman opened it.

"I'm terribly sorry to bother you at a time like this," Strong apologized. "But I want to save you some money--and trouble. I'm from the police department. Has any one been around yet with a bill your husband was supposed to have run up? About anything at all--whisky, books, clothes?"

The woman shook her head in bewilderment. "No, my Julius never bought nothin' that I didn't know about. He--he was such a good man." The woman's handkerchief went to her eyes.

"Yes, I'm sure he was," Strong said hastily. "But if any one should come around with a--bill, or want to collect money from you, will you call the district attorney's office at once and ask for Sergeant Strong?"

The bereaved woman promised, and Strong left hastily. He picked up the cab around the corner and drove to an address on Addison Street. Here he spoke to another widow. She was not as composed as the middle-aged woman on Orchard Street, and Strong had a bad few minutes of it. He began to feel like a ghoul as he started out for the third address on the list.

THERE were more than forty funeral notices in the paper. Strong called at the addresses of eight. He passed up all those that told of female death, as well as those which indicated, by the addresses, better-than-moderate circumstances.

The work took more than two hours; then, Strong had his cab driver take him down to headquarters.

"Where you been?" exclaimed the clerk at the desk in the outer office. "There've been four calls for you in the last hour and all of 'em from crying women."

"Give the numbers to me," said Strong quickly.

The clerk handed him four slips of paper. Strong went into his private office, sat down and called the first number on the slip. It was the widow on Orchard Street.

"Oh, Mr. Strong!" the woman cried when Strong identified himself. "You was hardly gone, when he come. He say my husband owe fifty-seven dollars for whisky and if I don't pay it right away, he puts attachment on the insurance money. And then the undertaker won't bury Julius. Ach, what shall I do?"

"When's the funeral?" Strong asked.

"To-morrow at eleven o'clock."

"Then don't do anything. Don't pay him if he comes back. Tell him you can't get the money until tomorrow."

The next call was to a widow on Blackhawk Street. She was of firmer stuff than the first saying, "I know George Baker never bought any fur coat for any blonde, because during the three years we've been married he was never out of my sight long enough to take up with a blonde. It's a swindle!"

"Of course it is, Mrs. Baker," Strong assured her. "These crooks are hitting at people who've just lost a loved one, knowing that they will either pay an unreasonable bill to keep the dead one's name from being besmirched, or they're poor widows who need the insurance money for the funeral and can't have it tied up. Listen, Mrs. Baker, don't do anything until I see you."

Strong left his taxi on Halsted Street and walked a block and a half down Blackhawk. He was taking no further chance of encountering the two thugs who had attacked him earlier that day. They were too tough to handle unprepared and, anyway--they were merely tools for a master mind who was the one Strong wanted.

THERE were several relatives with Mrs. Baker, but she led Strong to a private room. She was a woman of forty or so, strong-willed and determined.

"Even if George had bought a fur coat for a woman, I wouldn't pay the bill," she declared. "He never bought any fur coat for me."

"I'm sure he didn't buy the fur coat," said Strong. "I've checked with several other widows to-day and they've been approached by the same crooks, although the bills were for different items. In one or two cases, when they learned that the deceased drank occasionally, the bills were reputedly for whisky. In the case of your husband, they found that he didn't drink, so used the fur coat stuff. Now look, we want to get these crooks. And the only way we can is to make them come to us."

"I get the idea," said Mrs. Baker. "The man who was here hinted that I'd be sorry if I didn't pay the bill. He's giving me until seven this evening. He's coming then."

"Umm," said Strong, "that won't do. I don't want the henchman alone. When he comes, we want him to go away and bring back his boss. Let's see--are you game for something rather strong?"

"Anything," replied Mrs. Baker. "It happens that I'm a woman who can take things. I imagine, though, some of the other poor widows these crooks have fleeced are pretty hurt when they apparently learn their husbands have been holding out on them in some way."

"I've seen some of them," said Strong, grimly. "And getting these crooks will give me more pleasure than anything I've done in years. Here's the plan: I'll send down to headquarters and borrow a cheap fur coat. When the man comes here, you tell him you've gone to see Mrs. X, and that you got the fur coat from her and they can have it. But you'll pay no bill. That, I think, will shake out the head man. It's worth a try, anyway."

Mrs. Baker spoke to some of her relatives and friends, and by seven o'clock that evening there were only two or three remaining in the flat. Strong himself was seated in a bedroom, behind heavy drapes. The room was just

off the living room in which reposed the coffin and numerous floral wreaths.

THE crook came promptly at seven. He came in a closed car and the motor was kept running, with the man who had driven the truck earlier that day behind the wheel.

Strong saw that much through a slit in the bedroom shade. He recognized the man who came up the stairs as the other one of the two who had fought with him, the man who had wielded the blackjack. Strong touched the lump on his head and gripped his Police Positive.

Mrs. Baker brought the man into the living room where Strong could overhear the conversation.

"I've run down that woman," Mrs. Baker told the crook. "And I've got the fur coat. Here it is. Now take your bill and frame it, for all I care."

Strong heard the sharp intake of the crook's breath. "Uh--you can't do that," the man protested. "The coat's been worn. It isn't worth the money now."

"No?" asked Mrs. Baker. "Well, it wasn't worth the money you claim George agreed to pay for it, in the first place. That coat hasn't been worn over three months, and the fifty dollars down payment you say George made ought to cover that."

"Look, lady," said the crook, "I don't want the coat. You keep it. All I want is the two hundred and twenty-five that's still due on it, and unless we get the money tonight, there won't be any funeral tomorrow. On account of we'll put an attachment on the insurance money and your undertaker won't bring around his fancy limousine and the other stuff. I tell you, we mean business."

"So do I," declared Mrs. Baker. "It so happens that I've enough money to pay for the funeral, aside from the insurance money. So go ahead, put on

your attachment. I'll fight the thing in court."

Strong heard the man mutter under his breath. Then his voice came, placatingly: "Let's make a deal, Mrs. Baker. We don't want to crowd you under the circumstances. So suppose you pay us a hundred and fifty dollars and we'll call the thing quits."

"We? You've got a partner? Well, bring him around here with a receipt marked paid in full and I'll give you a hundred and twenty-five. That's all. It's worth that much not to go to court."

"I've the bill right here. I'll receipt it."

"No, I want this thing done right. My lawyer's coming here at eight o'clock. Be here then with the bill, because I want him to see that I get a proper receipt."

There was a moment's silence, then the crook said, "We'll be here with the chief--at eight o'clock."

He departed and Strong came out of the bedroom. "He'll be back inside of a half hour. He doesn't want to meet any lawyers. He figures you're too smart, and I'm afraid if you're here then there'll be rough stuff. Could you visit--some neighbors until the thing is settled?"

MRS. BAKER and her relatives left the flat inside of five minutes. Fifteen minutes later Strong sat on a chair beside the coffin in the living room. His gun was in its holster, but he had made sure that it would not stick. He expected to have to use it in a hurry.

He looked at his watch. If he had guessed correctly, they'd be here inside of a few minutes now.

Even as he thought of it, the doorbell rang. Strong rose quickly and stepped to the window. There was no car outside. He frowned. He hoped it wasn't a

friend or relative of the deceased. He stepped to the door and opened it.

A heavy-set man of about forty was in the act of removing his hat. He stayed the movement, however, when he saw Strong. "Mrs. Baker--can I see her?" the man asked.

"I'm sorry," said Strong. "Mrs. Baker isn't feeling well at the moment. Could I take care of whatever you want? I'm Mrs. Baker's cousin."

A frown crossed the heavy-set man's face. "Why, I'm Henry Comstock," he said. "It's distressing to have to come at a time like this about such a matter, but perhaps Mrs. Baker has told you. It seems the late Mr. Baker ran up a bill at our store and--ah--gave us the wrong address. We just learned about his demise and naturally we presented the bill. Mrs. Baker asked me to call for the money this evening."

"Ah, yes, Mr. Comstock," said Strong. "Mrs. Baker told me all about you. In fact--I listened in when she talked to your plug-ugly a while ago. And so-  
---"

An automobile horn honked violently somewhere across the street. And then Mr. Comstock made a sudden movement. Without preamble, he brought up his knee and struck Strong sharply in the stomach. Strong gasped and bent forward.

At the same time, he reached out instinctively and fastened his right hand on Comstock's coat. Comstock swore and struck down at Strong's hand. Strong released his grip and shot the hand about Comstock's leg.

His other hand went to join the right and then Strong tugged, hard. Comstock went over backward, his head hitting the door jamb. He yelped in pain.

Strong reached back with his right hand and clawed at his gun. He looked out over Comstock, saw the truck driver of the morning leave a car parked across the street and come rushing across.

Strong's teeth ground together. He freed the gun from his holster and tried to level it across Comstock's body. Comstock heaved up at the moment and spoiled Strong's aim.

"Down!" gritted Strong.

Comstock howled and heaved up again. Strong started to smash his gun down on the widow-robber's head, but an invisible fist suddenly struck the barrel of his gun and whipped it from his hand. At the same instant, an explosion behind Strong rocked the room.

STRONG gasped and jerked his head around. To his consternation, he saw the third member of the ghoulish gang only a few feet behind him, a gun in his hand. And he was just about to shoot again. The crooks had been suspicious and had approached the house on Blackhawk Street with caution. Comstock had come alone. The truck driver had timed things so he'd arrive a moment later, across the street. And the third man had gone ahead, come in from the alley.

Strong had already been fired on twice that day and had escaped with amazing good luck. He knew the luck wouldn't hold a third time. He suddenly caught hold of Comstock and, using every last bit of his strength, rolled over, bringing Comstock over on top of him.

The gunman held his fire. Strong heard him cursing. He heard, too, feet pounding up the stairs and knew the truck driver would be in it in a moment. And three to one was too much.

Nevertheless, Strong kept Comstock on top of him, even though the man struggled furiously to get loose.

"Hit him with your gun!" Comstock yelled. "Bust his skull open and let's get out of here."

"Get your head out of the way," snarled the man with the gun, "and I'll plug him."

A gun exploded, but no bullet struck Strong. None even thudded into the floor in his vicinity. He heard a cry of anguish, though, and shoving Comstock to one side, saw the gunman reeling back.

A gun roared again and the truck driver, just charging through the door, missed his step and plunged headlong to the floor, within a few inches from Strong. He did not get up.

"All right, Harry!" cried Strong. "That's all!" He heaved up violently and rolled Comstock off him. He had the crook securely handcuffed before he rose to his feet. Then he turned to the coffin in the living room. A man was sitting up in it--a Police Positive in either hand.

Comstock saw, too, and he cried out in horror. Strong grinned, saying, "Naw, it isn't a ghost. Only Sergeant Devlin, the best pistol shot on the force. You've been robbing the dead for a long time, so you shouldn't mind being stopped by some one in a coffin. Actually--you suggested the thing to me. You and your boys.

"You see, Mrs. Baker had her husband's body at the funeral chapel. So, the coffin seemed like a good place to hide Devlin. You boys made it so tough for me to-day that I didn't feel like tackling you a third time--without some damn good help."

## **The Chinese Box By C. K. M. Scanlon**

*A Boastful Crook's Clever Scheme Boomerangs when Mystery Stalks a Might Club!*

MARSHALL was nursing his second drink at a ringside table in the Glow Worm Club before Bryan Cleborn appeared. Marshall knew a sense of relief. During the hour he had waited he had begun to wonder whether Cleborn would show up at all.

Cleborn was alone, minus the dazzling blondes he had been parading around. He saw Marshall, lifted his eyebrows in a characteristic gesture and came over to the table.

"Hello," he said. "Can't I go anywhere without seeing you? You're not trailing me, are you?"

"How'd you guess?" Marshall said. He laughed with just the right amount of amusement.

Inside him was a tiny worm of fiercer laughter. If Cleborn only knew how right he was! But how would this rich idler know that the well-groomed and well-heeled Marshall was not another rich idler spending his life in night clubs by choice, but rather a very businesslike crook who spent his time where he did because his best customers were there?

Logan Marshall had been patiently cultivating Cleborn for weeks, studying him. Sooner or later, he knew, that cultivation would bear fruit.

A waiter came up, hung poised at Cleborn's elbow.

"Telephone for you, sir. Booth Number Seven."

"See you later, Marshall," Cleborn said.

Marshall got up a few seconds behind Cleborn. Carrying his drink, he wandered aimlessly in the direction of the phone booths. He saw Cleborn go into one and shut the door. With unobtrusive speed, Marshall slid into Booth Six.

Through the insulated wall he heard the faint murmur of Cleborn's voice, but could not distinguish words. He drained the rest of his drink, letting the ice cube drop into his mouth. Then he placed the rim of the glass firmly against the wall and pressed his ear to the bottom. At once he could hear Cleborn's words.

"--not enough!" Cleborn was saying. There was anger in his smooth, controlled tones. "Listen, Spinner. I want twenty thousand by seven o'clock tomorrow evening and I don't want any argument about it. What? All right, see that you do. I'll be waiting."

There was a click as Cleborn hung up. Marshall removed the glass and brought it back to drinking position. The ice cube was freezing his tongue and he dropped it back in the glass. After a moment he opened the door cautiously and looked out. Cleborn was disappearing in the direction of the tables.

SO CLEBORN was getting twenty thousand dollars tomorrow night! This was the break Marshall had been waiting for. There had been something a little strange about that phone conversation, about the way in which Cleborn had issued his commands. But Marshall was not worried about Cleborn's morals. If one of his blondes was making trouble and had to be bought off, that was Cleborn's worry. Marshall was interested only in knowing when and where that money would be. He had no doubt of his ability to handle Cleborn.

After a moment or two he circled around and came back from the direction of the men's room. Cleborn was back at the table and he scarcely seemed to notice Marshall's absence or return. He left earlier than usual.

Marshall made his preparations carefully next day. Not that there was much to do. It was so beautifully simple. He knew where Cleborn lived; he had been a guest at the luxurious penthouse once or twice. All he had to do was get there before seven, watch to be sure Cleborn's visitor arrived, wait until he left, and then go upstairs and collect. It was quick, painless, fool-proof.

The day dragged. He went out and tried to busy himself, but his mind was on the coming evening and impatience drove him home again. When he got back, he found the afternoon mail had brought him a small package. There was no return address on it. Wondering who had sent it to him, Marshall tore off the paper.

There was a jade box inside, a small flat Chinese box scarcely larger than a cigarette case. Its green surface was carved into the most intricate and beautiful designs he had ever seen. It looked expensive.

He tried to open it but strangely enough it would not open. There was no lock that he could see, and a seam down one side clearly indicated an opening, but it refused to yield to all his pulling and tugging.

"Must be some hidden catch or spring," Marshall puzzled.

He began to hunt through the intricate carvings of the surface. Where Chinese dragons were carved on the larger sides he pressed the eyes experimentally, hunted in the crevices of the carving, explored the tiny mouths with their tusks and forked tongues of jade. Nothing happened.

Absorbed in this, he discovered with a start that it was six-thirty, time to go. He slipped the box into a pocket and his flat .32 automatic into another.

At a quarter to seven he was strolling past Cleborn's apartment house, on the opposite side of the street. His weeks of shadowing proved their value now. He knew by sight most of the people who belonged there. At four minutes to seven, a stranger to Marshall alighted from a cab, clutching a brief-case, and went upstairs. At thirteen minutes past seven, he emerged, hailed a cab and departed.

Marshall threw away his cigarette and crossed over. He gave his name to the doorman and waited while the flunky phoned up. There was a moment's hesitation.

"Mr. Cleborn says to go right up, sir."

There was a private elevator which opened directly into Cleborn's penthouse apartment. His living room was glassed in like a greenhouse. One set of windows looked out on a garden terrace, the other on a drop of twenty stories to the first ledge below, giving unbroken light from all directions.

Cleborn wore a brown tweed suit. A traveling case stood on the floor with a topcoat thrown carelessly over it.

"Glad you dropped in Marshall," Cleborn said. "Gives me a chance to say good-by. Drink?"

"Scotch. You're going out of town?"

"One of those business things." He mixed the drinks with a tinkling sound, handed a glass to Marshall. "Sit down. I've got a few minutes before my train."

MARSHALL sat down. He was not nervous, but he welcomed a drink at a time like this. Not that he anticipated any trouble. Cleborn wasn't the type. He would fold up at sight of the persuader in Marshall's pocket.

Still, that drink didn't taste right. Could he be nervous after all?

A peculiar numbness was stealing through his legs. Cleborn was watching him, smiling. The man's face blurred, momentarily became double.

Then Marshall knew. His drink had been doped!

He drove his hand for his gun. How slowly it moved! It seemed agonizing hours before his fingers closed on the butt. Then it was a struggle to lift it out of the pocket. Before it cleared the cloth he knew he would not be able to press the trigger. Strange. His muscles refused to obey, yet apart from that momentary blur and double vision, his sight was clear enough and his brain was not fogged at all.

Cleborn still smiled. Now he stepped forward and took the gun from Marshal's lax fingers.

"So you see," he said, "you G-men are not so smart after all."

G-men! Did Cleborn think he was a G-man? Marshall would have laughed if his face had not been frozen immobile. He tried to speak, found that he could not manipulate his tongue or lips. "You cannot talk," Cleborn said, watching his struggles. 'But you can hear. Listen then.'

He stood in front of the helpless man, smiling down at him as he talked.

"Weeks ago I knew you were a G-man. You were clever enough to discover my--ah--shall I say 'international connections?' You probably were able to discover something about the job I have been working on here as well. But you have not been clever enough to stop it. Tonight I finish that job and I leave."

He gestured towards the suitcase.

"Tonight also, I regret to say, I must kill you and so remove any possibility of your making a further nuisance of yourself."

HE WALKED to the window and stared out.

"We will wait until dark. Then I will slide you out of the window here, where there is quite a drop. I don't think you will survive it, Mr. Marshall. I

am sorry. As a matter of fact, I had planned quite a different end for you. Too bad you were not home today.

"Yesterday I mailed you a lovely little Chinese box. It must be waiting for you at home now. In that box was a time mechanism and enough high explosive to demolish you and your entire apartment quite effectively. It was set for eight o'clock. Too bad it will be wasted."

A time bomb! That innocent little box in his side pocket! Marshall's staring eyes took in the face of the clock opposite. It was three minutes to eight!

"Darkness is coming," Cleborn said. "It won't be long now."

Marshall strove to speak, strained to burst the bonds of this silent paralysis that gripped him. But why? Why should he warn Cleborn?

Either way, there was no way out for him. If he warned Cleborn, the spy might be able to stop the time mechanism in the remaining minute or two. But that would be no help to Marshall! In a few moments he would slide over the window sill to hurtle twenty stories onto the ledge below. Why speak indeed?

He was finished, he knew. And in his philosophy there were no regrets. How better to go than to take this spy along with him?

CLEBORN must have seen some hint of a smile in his eyes. The spy halted his pacing to stare down into the helpless man's face.

"What are you thinking, Marshall? That there is still hope? Believe me, there is not. The drug will not wear off in time for you to save yourself. And now I am almost glad the box did not get you. For I would rather do this myself and be sure--"

He broke off. From Marshall's pocket had come a clear and unmistakable click.

Marshall saw his eyes widen, saw frenzied realization burst upon him. The spy's hands flew out as though warding off a blow. An agonized cry broke from him.

"No--no!"

That was all Marshall saw or heard as the world dissolved in blinding red flame and darkness closed swiftly upon them.

## The Dead Client By J. Lane Linklater



*Hugo Oakes returns to Meet the Mystery of the Two Murdered Men with Holes Punched in Their Hands, and the Girl Who Had a Scandal in her Past*

HUGO OAKES, attorney--and, on occasion, criminal investigator--was aroused from a sound sleep at nine thirty in the evening by his telephone. He did not like it.

"I'm Jack Frisby," said a husky voice. "I want you to come out here."

"Out where?" grumbled Oakes.

His short, ungainly form was shrouded in an old-fashioned nightgown. His pudgy face wore a frown. He seriously objected to being disturbed that late at night, nine o'clock being his regular bed-time.

"Out in the Manorville section," said Frisby. "You just have to take a taxi--"

"I'm an honest lawyer," snapped Oakes. "Anyhow, I'm honest part of the time. I can't afford taxis. Have you got plenty of dough?"

"Well, I'm a little short just now," Frisby admitted nervously, "but I'll pay you some day. It's important--"

"So is the cash," shouted Gates. "You've got yourself in a jam, or you wouldn't be calling me. People who ain't got the cash ain't got no business getting into jams. You just go 'way and let me sleep."

"It's urgent," pleaded Frisby. "The police are on the way out here--"

"What for?"

"Murder!"

Oakes hesitated.

"Well, I can't stop sleeping just for a murder," he growled finally. "Not if you ain't got the dough."

"But you must," insisted Frisby desperately. "You just take a taxi out to the edge of the Manorville section. The Fanton house on Carmen Avenue. Please hurry! You--"

"Aw, shut up!" roared Oakes, in disgust, and slammed the receiver down.

He sat on the edge of the bed for a moment, wearily scratching his bald pate. Presently he got up, muttering, dressed, hurried out and called a taxi.

The Manorville section was a well-to-do residence addition on the northern edge of the city. Oakes found the Fanton house without difficulty. A policeman who knew him, let him in.

Inspector Mallory, with his assistant, Carter, were in a smaller room across the hall. With them was "Doc" Ramer, coroner's physician, and Kendall a technical man. Oakes knew them all.

Mallory, heavy and pugnacious, swung about as Oakes entered, and glared.

"What the--"

"Nice evening, inspector," Oakes grinned cheerfully. "Better treat me good. I belong here--got a client."

"Who?" enquired Mallory, eagerly.

"Ain't seen him yet. Who's the stiff?"

He stuck a thumb at a middle-aged man lying on a couch, a sparsely-built man almost as bald as Oakes himself.

Mallory shrugged helplessly.

"Dead man's name is Vicker," he told Oakes. "Just a servant."

"Uh huh. How come he's dead?"

"Poison. See?"

Mallory lifted Vicker's left hand. Very near the center of the palm the hand had been punctured by a sharp instrument. And clearly that instrument had been tipped with poison.

"What kind?" Oakes asked the physician.

DON'T recall the name of the poison off-hand," Ramer explained. "Looks to me, though, like some sort of a native poison."

"Where's the instrument that did it?"

"Ain't found it yet," Mallory scowled. "Them things take time to look up."

"What was it?"

"Dunno," Ramer answered laconically for Mallory. "Looks like an icepick, or something like that."

"Where did they pick him up?"

"Out on the walk, toward the rear of the house."

"Uh huh. Well, how long--"

"Excuse me, inspector," said a voice from the door.

A man had appeared at the door. He was tall, dark, face handsomely aquiline, tone and manner very suave.

"What is it, Mr. Danley?" Mallory said, quite respectfully.

The man came in.

"I thought I ought to tell you about young Frisby," he said smoothly. "He's been gone some time."

"Frisby?" queried Mallory, in some bewilderment, while Oakes concealed his interest in the act of clumsily rolling a cigarette. "Frisby?"

"Yes. You didn't see him at all, and none of us told you about him. But I thought, in the interests of justice, you should know. After I phoned the police, Frisby himself called someone on the phone. Right after that he walked down the hall toward the back of the house. None of us has seen him since."

Mallory turned to his man, Carter.

"Search the house and grounds for that guy!"

Carter went out. Oakes addressed the man called Danley.

"Who is this guy Frisby?" he inquired about his own client.

Danley hesitated.

"To be strictly accurate," he said, "Jack Frisby is rather a wild young man. I don't like to--"

"That don't tell me much," Oakes complained. "I asked who, not what."

"Well," explained Danley, smiling faintly, "he was a close friend of Harry Fanton."

"And who is Harry Fanton?"

"The son of Mrs. Reginald Fanton. This is her house. She went away the other day, and Harry has been--well, what they call throwing a party."

"And you were one of the guests?"

"I?" Danley seemed a trifle surprised that anyone should be interested in his identity. "Not exactly. I just happened to run out this evening to see Harry on business. You see, I'm the family attorney."

"Lawyer?" Oakes grinned. "Me too. My name is Oakes--Hugo Oakes."

"Extremely glad to meet you, Mr. Oakes," Danley said courteously. "I've heard of you. Of course, my line is business, not criminal, so I--"

"Not so much different," Oakes disagreed. "Now, about this Jack Frisby. I'd like to know--"

Carter hurried back into the room.

"I found that guy Frisby," he announced to Mallory. "Out on the front lawn."

"Then why didn't you bring him?" demanded Mallory irritably.

"He's dead!" said Carter.

There was silence for a moment.

"Who woulda thought," Oakes said sadly, "that I would be working for a dead client?"

THEY all went out to the front lawn. Mallory directed a flashlight on a form crumpled silently on the ground. "Doc " Ramer knelt down beside it and went over it carefully.

"Strange!" he muttered.

"What?" said Oakes.

"Look at that left hand!"

The hand had been punctured in the palm, just as Vicker's had been.

"Not quite the same place," Oakes commented.

"A little more toward the edge of the palm," concurred Ramer.

"And," added Oakes, "there seems to be a slight smudge of some kind against the fleshy part of the thumb."

"Yes," said Ramer. "Made by the same kind of fluid as was injected into the palm."

"What of it?" growled Mallory.

"Who can tell?" said Oakes. "Anything on him?"

Mallory was busy, cautiously searching the young man. He found money, a watch, keys.

"Well, well!" he said presently.

He had discovered an eight-inch steel file on the grass alongside the dead man.

"Probably carrying that in his uninjured hand," Oakes volunteered. "That may be the answer to the problem."

"Pretty hard to make that kind of a hole in the hand with that kind of an instrument," said Ramer.

Oakes, however, did not wait to listen further. He went back into the house and at once entered the room where the others were waiting. There were four of them: Mr. Danley, Harry Fanton, a young lady and a plump little man with a rubicund face and small twinkling eyes.

The plump little man was standing near the door.

Oakes looked at the lawyer.

"Ah, Mr. Danley," he said genially, "introduce me."

Danley obliged willingly. Harry Fanton was a tall, rather good-looking young man, a somewhat spoiled son of wealth. He was just now very nervous.

The young lady was an extremely pretty brunette, whose large dark eyes were worried. Her name was Nanette Shelby.

"You'll recall Miss Shelby," added Danley, with a smile.

"Yeah," said Oakes. "The movie actress."

"I used to be," corrected Miss Shelby.

"Uh huh," said Oakes, not without sympathy. "Some kind of a scandal cooked your career, huh?"

Miss Shelby flushed.

"And you?" Oakes said to the little plump man.

"Hiram Sedder," he said affably. "I'm sorry about this affair, Mr. Oakes."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Why?" repeated Sedder, puzzled. "I don't understand you. Why wouldn't I be sorry--"

"Sure. But I mean, you ain't mixed up in it, are you? You ain't under suspicion?"

Sedder smiled again.

"Not that I know of. I'm sorry more on Miss Shelby's account than anything else, of course, because--well, you know, one scandal following another--"

"And how is Miss Shelby so involved?" Oakes asked.

"I didn't say she was--that is, not in any guilty sense," argued Sedder. "For that matter, she wasn't guilty in that other affair that did her so much damage."

"The innocent suffer with the guilty," lamented Oakes. "Now, take Jack Pines. He was quite a movie star, but scandal killed his career. Then scandal killed *him*, and now I see they're showing his pictures--"

"YES, poor fellow," agreed Sedder.

"Jack was really a splendid chap. But, of course, Miss Shelby's scandal has nothing to do with the affair here."

"Uh huh. But it ain't often I meet movie stars. I suppose all the men in the house tonight have known you some time, Miss Shelby?"

The young lady only nodded. She was very badly upset.

"What were your relations with each of them?" Oakes queried.

"You mean, you--you want to know--"

"Now, see here," cut in Harry Fanton, angrily. "Nanette has nothing to do with all this. Nothing at all! Can't you see she's all broken up? Why don't you leave her alone?"

"I want to know all about you guys," Oakes said stubbornly.

"Suppose I give you the information," offered the lawyer, Danley. "I make it a point to keep pretty well posted, so I know about that."

"And if you really want to find out something," put in Harry Fanton, "you might ask Jack Frisby."

"Why, Jack?" said Oakes.

"Oh, I don't know. Only, if anyone around here was capable of violence, it was he."

Oakes grinned pleasantly.

"You don't like Jack, huh?"

"Well, he's all right. Old friend of mine. But--well, there were some things about him--"

"Especially his interest in Miss Shelby, huh?"

"That's none of your damned business," snapped the young man. "Anyhow, why did Jack run away?"

"He didn't," Oakes retorted placidly. "He only got himself killed!"

"Killed!"

Harry Fanton gulped the word. He seemed to be genuinely shocked. But so, for that matter, did the others. Miss Shelby gasped and sank back in her chair. Oakes watched them all closely.

"Yeah," he said. "He got killed. The same way that the other guy got his. Sharp instrument injected deadly poison into the palm of his hand. It ain't likely he had any reason to kill Vicker, and still less likely to kill himself."

"Unless," suggested Danley smoothly, "he killed the servant by mistake, and then killed himself because of remorse."

"That's an idea," Oakes agreed. "But who would he--"

He was interrupted by Mallory striding into the room.

Mallory glared at Miss Shelby.

"Well, young woman," he rumbled, "why not come through?"

"But I--I don't know anything," protested the actress.

"You don't? Then how about this?"

He produced a slip of paper.

"I found this in Jack Frisby's pocket--a note from you to him. The note says: 'Meet me usual time and usual place tonight.' And it's signed *Nan*."

MISS SHELBY covered her face with her hands.

"All right," barked Mallory. "Speak up!"

But the actress only wept.

"You don't have to talk, lady," Oakes advised gently. "I'm a lawyer, and I advise you not to talk to this big mug of a cop--"

"You shut up!" roared Mallory. "This woman is either guilty herself, or anyhow she knows something. I want--"

"I don't care!" cried Miss Shelby. "I don't care who knows! Jack and I loved each other! Is there any crime in that? We loved each other--and now he's dead!"

"Well, since you're answering questions, lady," Oakes put in, "answer this one: why was it necessary for you two to meet secretly?"

"Why I--because of Mr. Danley," stammered Miss Shelby.

"Ah!" said Oakes, softly. "Mr. Danley has something to do with it!"

"Only that he didn't want me to get mixed up with Jack, and he--well, he has a good deal of control over my affairs, and I--we didn't want to antagonize him, so we kept our affair secret."

Mr. Danley cleared his throat.

"Of course," he admitted. "My advice to Miss Shelby in that respect was purely professional. Jack Frisby was a likeable young man, but he had been in several scrapes, and under the circumstances I regarded Miss Shelby's association with him as distinctly inadvisable."

"Naturally," Oakes suggested pleasantly, "you didn't have any personal interest in the lady yourself, Danley?"

"Only as a friend."

"Oh, sure," said Oakes, very agreeably. "As a friend."

"I don't see what all this has to do with Frisby's getting bumped off the way he did," interposed Mallory. "Now, Miss Shelby, Jack Frisby went out there to meet you--"

"But he didn't," denied Miss Shelby, tearfully. "Not when he went out tonight. Our time for meeting was more than an hour later, so he must have had some other reason--"

"You expect me to believe that?" bellowed Mallory.

"You should believe the lady," Oakes answered for her. "She's tell the truth. I got an idea that Frisby went out to meet *me*."

"You?"

"Sure. He phoned for me to come out here. He figured I'd be here soon, if at all. He probably had something to tell me privately, so he slipped out quietly to meet me. But he was dead before I got here."

Mr. Danley stirred in his chair.

"Allow me to point out," he said, "that apparently I was the last to see Jack Frisby. And when I saw him he wasn't going out the front door--he was walking along the hall toward the rear of the house."

Oakes turned to the actress.

"How did you usually arrange the meeting?"

"Why, Jack always went out quietly by the front door and walked around to the garden at the back. Then I waited my chance and slipped down the back stairs to the basement, and there was a door leading from the basement out to the garden at the back."

"There you are!" Oakes chuckled. "Jack Frisby took the route that the lady usually took--by way of the basement."

Mallory frowned.

"We ain't getting any where," he objected. "Now, somebody killed Vicker and Frisby, Who? There's four people here--Mr. Danley, Harry Fanton, Hiram Sedder and Miss Shelby. So far it's the woman--"

"You always did like to pick on the ladies, inspector," Oakes reproved him. "Ain't you overlooking something?"

"Me?" barked Mallory.

"Yeah. Now, both these birds were killed in the same way. Sharp instrument, tipped with poison, stuck into the palm of the hand. How could Miss Shelby do that?"

"Well, how could anybody do it?" countered Mallory. "Must have been some trick. It would be hard for even a man to grab Frisby's hand, for instance, and stick something in it, if Frisby knew what was being done."

"Perhaps," offered Danley, "someone shook hands with him, and had the instrument concealed in his hand."

"Sure!" Mallory was triumphant. "Nobody coulda done it better than the woman. Frisby would want to hold her hand, wouldn't he?"

"How do you know how lovers act?" grinned Oakes. "And I suppose she held Vicker's hand, too. Another thing, was she out of the house long enough to do all this?"

There was a moment of quiet, and those in the room looked at each other curiously.

"As a matter of fact," said the plump little man, Sedder, "we were all milling about the house after dinner. So far as *I* know, the only one who was missing for any length of time was Harry Fanton." He smiled apologetically at the young man. "And, of course, we all know that he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"He wouldn't, huh?" Oakes said sternly. "How about that, young feller?"

"Well, I--I disappeared for a little while," he admitted, scowling at Sedder. "But I only went up to my room to lie down. I was all in--"

"Can you prove you were in your room?" demanded Oakes.

"I don't know about that. Maybe not. You see, I didn't tell anyone. And nobody saw me, except Vicker-- and he's dead."

"He sure is," said Oakes.

"Looks to me like it was some scheme cooked up between this young guy, Fanton, and the woman," said Mallory.

SUDDENLY without explanation, Oakes turned and left the room. He went out the front door and circled the house until he came to the back basement door of which Miss Shelby had spoken. There were two steps down from the walk to the door. It was quite dark here. The door was still partly open, and just inside it was pitch dark. Oakes took out a flashlight and played it about, so that he could see inside without going in himself.

There were also, inside, two steps down from the basement floor to the door so that anyone making an exit in this way would have had to take two steps down to the door, and then two steps up to the walk.

It was, Oakes noted, a small door, not over five feet and a half high. Even a person of average height would have been in danger of bumping his head on the beam above the door.

Oakes sat on the upper step, outside, and wagged his head in the darkness.

"Neat!" he muttered.

In a few moments he got up and walked back around to the front of the house and entered. Mallory was still questioning the people in the living room. Apparently he had been concentrating on Miss Shelby and Harry Fanton. The young woman was at the point of hysteria.

Oakes motioned to Mallory.

"I want a nice collection of shoes and pants," he said with a wide grin.

"You're crazy," said Mallory.

But Oakes insisted. From young Harry Fanton he learned where he could get several pairs of slippers, and three pairs of trousers. Fanton, Danley, Sedder and Miss Shelby were all required to remove their shoes. The three

men were told to change their trousers, an indignity to which they submitted only after some argument.

The shoes and trousers were turned over to Kendall, the technical man, with instructions from Oakes. Mallory returned to the living room.

Oakes, however, proceeded down the hall. At the rear of the hall were two doors, one leading to the kitchen and the other to the basement stairs. Oakes descended to the basement, using his flashlight.

HE directed his light to the beam above the door. Just as he caught a glimpse of two glimmering points of light, his flashlight failed.

Swearing softly, Oakes returned upstairs. He found Mallory just about to leave in disgust.

"Wait a minute, inspector," Oakes said. "Has it occurred to you that maybe someone else is in line for getting killed?"

"What?" barked Mallory.

"I mean," said Oakes, "ain't it likely that Vicker and Frisby both met the fate intended for someone else?"

"Naw," said Mallory.

"Well, just an idea I had," said Oakes. "Another thing. How long have these people been around the house?"

"Why?" offered Hiram Sedder, "we've all been here a week or so, off and on--all except Mr. Danley."

"That's right," confirmed the lawyer. "I just came out this evening. I understand the others have been making it a sort of house party for several days."

Mallory stared at Oakes suspiciously.

"Who cares about that?" he demanded.

"It might explain something," Oakes said innocently. "How about all of us taking a little walk?"

"A walk? Where?"

"Down through the basement."

"Why?"

"Well," said Oakes, "Vicker and Frisby both got killed going out that way. We might learn something if--"

"That doesn't look entirely sane to me," objected Danley. "As I understand your theory, Mr. Oakes, it was the intention of the murderer to kill someone still alive. Therefore, if we follow your suggestion now, isn't it possible that some one of us may be in considerable danger?"

"Maybe," Oakes agreed cheerfully. "What about it?"

"We'll take a chance," decided Mallory. "Come on."

At the head of the basement stairs, Harry Fanton snapped a button, which lighted up the basement fairly well, but left the section near the outside door rather dark. Oakes and Mallory proceeded to the door, and waited, having instructed the others to come one at a time. Mallory's man, Carter, was left with them at the head of the stairs.

Miss Shelby was the first to arrive at the door. As she stepped down the two steps from the basement floor to the door, she put up her hand, obviously intending to steady herself against the beam above the door. Oakes, however, restrained her, and assisted her through.

Then came Harry Fanton, and later the lawyer, Danley. Both of these went through the same involuntary gesture of leaning against the beam for support.

Sedder was the last. He walked with extra care through the darkness, hesitated at the door, but went through it without raising his hand.

"Of course," said Oakes. "Inspector, you better take care of our friend, Sedder. You know what to do with killers!"

MALLORY laid a doubtful but nevertheless heavy hand on Hiram Sedder's shoulder.

"This--this is utterly absurd!" spluttered the little man. "Ridiculous! Why in the world would I want to kill these two men?"

"You didn't want to kill them," Oakes conceded. "You really wanted to kill Miss Shelby! You knew that this door was rarely used by anyone in the house. It was pure accident that Vicker and Frisby used it tonight. You--"

"Nonsense! Why, Miss Shelby is my friend!, I--"

"She may be," said Oakes grimly. "But, to you, she was simply an investment. It is hard to prove a motive, but easy enough to figure one out in this case. You had a lot of money in Miss Shelby's motion pictures. Scandal came along and ruined that investment. The same thing happened to poor Jack Pines. But you probably noticed that when Pines died, public sentiment softened and his old pictures were being exhibited at considerable profit to those interested in them. You figured that the same thing would happen in the case of Miss Shelby. The lady, alive, represented a big loss to you, but, dead, she might make a nice profit!"

"But--"

"Aw, shut up!" said Oakes, amiably. "Better let me get through. You worked out a neat scheme for doing the job, too. You knew that Miss Shelby came out of this door at certain times to meet Jack Frisby-- doubtless you had watched her. You knew that she would do what almost anyone would do instinctively when coming through this door in the dark--reach up a hand

and lean against that beam for support. You were the only one in the bunch just now who kept his hand away from that beam--because you knew blamed well what was there!"

"But what--I--I mean--"

"What you did was sweet and very simple," Oakes went on. "You simply hammered two long nails through that beam so that the points protruded on the inside--and tipped the points with poison. It was a cinch that Miss Shelby would press the palm of her hand against one or the other of them."

Sedder sat down on the top step.

"I suppose you have evidence," he sneered. "I suppose you've traced the poison, and all that sort of thing--"

"That can come later," Oakes retorted serenely. "We don't need it right now. I first became suspicious of you, Sedder, when you pretended to bang that living room door on your thumb. That was just a little play you staged to account for the injured thumb. What you really did was to hit your thumb with the hammer when you were driving those nails there."

"But--"

"Aw, can't you keep still? Let's finish this upstairs."

They proceeded back to the living room, and in a few minutes Kendall came in with a pair of shoes and a pair of trousers.

"Now," said Oakes, "whose shoes are those?"

"They're mine," Sedder admitted sullenly.

"Of course. What about 'em, Kendall?"

"Strands of fibre in the soles, correspondingly to that box in the basement," said Kendall.

"Sure. Sedder was too short to point up them nails good and poison them without standing on something, so he had to use that box. How about the pants, Kendall?"

"Quite a few particles of iron down the front of the pants, probably from--"

"Exactly," finished Oakes. "That's where the file that was found on Frisby comes in. Frisby discovered that file somewhere, had some reason for believing it had to do with the killing of Vicker, and planned to show it to me. Sedder wanted to be sure that the nail points would be sharp enough to penetrate the lady's hand, so he carefully filed the points as sharp as he could." Oakes turned to Mallory. "Enough dope for a pinch, inspector?"

"Plenty," said Mallory. "We done a pretty good job on this case."

"We did," Oakes agreed. "Well, I got to get back to bed. S'long!"

"Better stick around for awhile," Mallory invited him. almost cordially.

"What for?" said Oakes. "Nothing in it for me. I can't get a nickel out of a dead client!"

## The Case Of The Golden Lily By Francis D. Grierson



"PAUL," said Lord Oakby deliberately, "I really believe I am the happiest fellow alive!"

Paul Pry smiled.

"That is a very comfortable frame of mind," he answered, in his quiet way.

"Confound you!" cried Oakby, laughing. "You're a jolly old cynic at forty-- is it forty, by the way? I never know whether you're thirty or fifty, Paul. I don't believe you've ever been in love."

Cracking a walnut as he spoke, he did not observe the sudden cloud that darkened the pleasant face opposite him. It vanished as quickly as it had come, and Paul spoke cheerfully:

"Well, well," he said, "I am not too cynical to enjoy your happiness, my dear fellow; and I do not wonder at it. You are young, fit and engaged to be married to a very charming girl. Here's to her!"

He sipped his port, and his friend drained his glass.

"By Jove, that's a stunning port!" cried Oakby. "It's--it's worthy of her," he added.

"It has been paid many compliments," Paul answered, "but that is the greatest of them all. But come," he added, "it's time we were going. The rest of the show is nothing to you, but I confess I rather like the Nadia's dancing--though of course she's not to be compared to Carol."

"Of course not," replied Lord Oakby naively, and again Paul chuckled as he rang for the car.

As they drove to the theater Mr. Paul Pry, that singular mixture of cynicism and good nature, reflected with satisfaction on the part he had played in Oakby's romance. Millionaire and amateur criminologist, Paul was a mystery; even the name by which he was so well known in half a dozen countries was an obvious pseudonym.

As Oakby's father, the Earl of Glenash, once said of him: "He goes everywhere and knows everybody, but nobody knows him"; nevertheless, the noble Earl was quite content to accept this state of affairs, for--like many others--he had his private reasons for entertaining for Paul a regard which was not free from gratitude.

When young Lord Oakby, the Earl's heir, cast his title at the pretty feet of Miss Carol Spring, the dancer who was filling the Quality Theater night after night, the old nobleman was at first furious, but Paul, like a god out of the car, appeared in his unexpected way and applied balm to the Earl's wound. Carol Spring, it appeared, was in no way unworthy of the coronet proposed for her. Her father, a gallant officer who had served with distinction in the Great War, had at last succumbed to the after-effects of a severe wound, leaving his motherless daughter barely enough means to live on. Paul, who had known Major Spring in earlier days, had heard of his condition only a few days before his death, but he had been in time to relieve the dying man's mind of anxiety regarding his daughter.

Carol at nineteen was the incarnate fragrance of a rose in June. Since her father died, two years before, she had lived in the care of the elderly lady who acted as Paul's housekeeper in London. Believing that the best cure for the girl's terrible loneliness was occupation, Paul sought to give her an interest in life.

She had always, he found, loved music, and her voice, though not powerful, was pleasing. At her request, Paul enabled her to enter school where would-be actresses learned the elements of their art, and there the directress, a shrewd woman, discovered where Carol's real talent lay.

"Miss Spring," she wrote to Paul, "might make a passable actress. She has a certain charm, a nice voice and a good figure. But I feel bound, against my own interests, to tell you that she is wasting her time here. Take her to a good professor of dancing; don't let him--if I may advise--try to turn her into a posture-maker; she is not a ballet-dancer, and never will be. But let him teach her just enough technique to frame the picture of her genius. She dances--because to dance expresses the sunshine of her soul. You will think me a sentimental old fool to write like this..."

But Paul did not think so; nor did the gray-haired Italian to whom he took Carol.

Under her master's skillful guidance, Carol was spared the long hours of painful posturing which make the great ballerina, but she retained and developed her natural poetry of movement, and one day the Signor came to Paul and told him that his pupil was ready to be shown to the world.

Vivian Dale, the owner and manager of the Quality Theater, was a friend of Paul. Sceptically--for he had so frequently had young prodigies hurled at his head, and had so often found them, as he said, to possess feet, not of clay, but apparently of lead--he came to the great bare room where the Signor, the girl and Paul awaited him.

Without preamble, the old maestro took up his violin and played a simple, haunting air, and Carol began to dance--nervously at first, but as the rhythm gripped her she forgot everything but the music, and danced, as she always did, "from the soul of her," in the Signor's phrase.

Vivian Dale watched her in silence until the last note had died away. Then he rose and took both the girl's hands in his.

"Miss Spring," he said, "it is not my way to pay compliments. I believe you have a great future before you. If you like, I will put you on at my theater at once."

Amazed and half frightened at this sudden realization of her ambitions, Carol blushed and murmured some confused words.

"This is very kind, Dale," said Paul, coming to her aid, but the other interrupted him.

"By no means," he said. "For your sake, my dear Paul, I was willing to come and see Miss Spring dance, but even for your sake I could not imperil the reputation that I think I may say I have built up for the Quality Theater. But, if I am any judge, Miss Spring is going to justify my faith in her. If you will both come round to my office tomorrow, I will have a contract prepared, and we can discuss the details of an idea that I think should be effective."

THE Quality Theater had justly won its place in the public estimation as a theater that put quality before quantity, and Vivian Dale had a remarkable power of combining the highest artistry with popularity. His great spectacles were mounted magnificently, and his present play, "Love o' the Ages," had been running for over a year. In it there appeared Mademoiselle Nadia Raskolnikovna, a beautiful Russian, whose "Storm" dance had set London talking. Dale, with characteristic audacity, decided to introduce a striking contrast; Carol, he resolved, should appear immediately after the passionate Russian in a "Sunshine" dance in which he believed that her fresh sweetness and artless gaiety would, in theatrical phrase, bring down the house.

The great posters bearing in huge letters the single word

## NADIA

were alternated with others on which were printed

## CAROL

and artistic half-hints to the Press piqued public curiosity.

The stage effects were cleverly planned. In a charming woodland scene Carol appeared, clad in a simple white robe, and danced in a flood of warmly-tinted light. At the end of her dance she took from an attendant concealed at the wings a great golden lily, in the center of which was fixed an electric globe of delicate rose-pink shade. Flitting to the front of the stage, she slowly raised the lily to her face, pressed a spring, and the warm glow suffused her cheeks and neck with the effect of a charming blush. On the night of Carol's first appearance Paul Pry sat in his box, concealing under his habitual *sang froid* a nervousness almost as great as that of his young ward in her dressing-room behind the scenes. Dale looked in for a minute and clapped him on the shoulder.

"She'll be great, Paul; you'll see," was all he said, and Paul heaved a sigh of relief, for Dale was rarely enthusiastic. Young Oakby, whom Paul had brought along with him, for he liked the boy's hearty cheeriness, laughed.

"Buck up, Paul," he said. "I 'm sure Miss Spring will be top-hole. I'm quite anxious to see her, you know, and I'm prepared to shout myself hoarse to help the applause."

Paul smiled, and turned to watch the Nadia as she began her dance. Tall, with rounded limbs and the magnificent bosom of a fully matured woman, she moved with the assurance of perfect training. She was wrapped in a red cloak, but as the music grew louder and louder, and great crashes of simulated thunder were heard, she cast the garment from her, and stood forth in a bronze sheathing which accentuated the beauties of her splendid body.

The dance ended in a gesture of passionate abandon, and she was recalled again and again to bow her acknowledgments of tremendous applause.

The curtain descended, to rise again in a few moments on the woodland glade into which wandered, after a pause, a slim figure in white. For a moment she stood, a hand at her breast, and looked vaguely into the great darkened auditorium in which she could distinguish nothing. Something in her wistful look set a woman sobbing, and in a moment an encouraging round of applause broke out. Dimly understanding that they were bidding her take courage, she smiled, and then the music recalled her to herself and she began to dance--slowly at first, but presently with the joyous spontaneity of youth.

Young Oakby, who had started when she first appeared, locked his hands together and followed her with his eyes as she flitted about the great stage with the graceful movements of a fawn. When, taking the golden lily, she lifted it to her lips and stood motionless before her judges, he sprang to his feet and cheered with an utter forgetfulness that would have been conspicuous had it not been shared by everybody in the theater.

Dale had been right.

Carol received such an ovation as comes to few, and next morning she awoke to find herself famous.

When the curtain fell for the last time Lord Oakby turned to Paul and said simply:

"Paul, I want to meet that girl."

Paul looked thoughtfully at him, noting with approval the steady eyes and firm mouth.

"You shall," he said.

In three months they were engaged to be married, for the Earl, finding that the "dancing girl" was the daughter of a gentleman and the ward of a man for whom he had a profound respect, consented to see her. After the interview, the old man became, as Paul said, almost as eager for the marriage as his son.

REMEMBERING these things, Paul smiled happily to himself as he and Oakby drove to the theater to see Carol give her last performance. On the morrow she bade adieu to the stage, to become the Viscountess Oakby.

The theater was crowded to its utmost capacity when they entered their box, and Lord Oakby sat back to endure the boredom of waiting until Carol should appear. But Paul leaned forward to watch the beautiful Russian as she swayed voluptuously in time to the music of her dance. He knew the type--imperious, passionate, quick to love and to hate. A dozen times he had seen such women playing sinister parts in dramas of love and crime. He watched her with the same mixture of admiration and repulsion as he would have felt at the sight of a magnificent tigress.

At last the curtain fell, and Oakby's eyes sparkled as the conductor signaled to his orchestra. The great curtain rose again, and a storm of plaudits greeted Carol's appearance.

Never had she danced so well; she was a butterfly, fluttering from blossom to blossom, a fairy, treading a magic measure on the enchanted sward.

At last the dance drew to its close. Snatching the golden lily from the attendant's hands, she advanced to the footlights. A hundred times before she had raised the lily to her lips with the same gesture, but tonight, turning toward the box in which, as the great audience knew, there sat the man she loved, she held the lily to him with outstretched hands, in a shy yet proud admission of her surrender.

In instant sympathy with the girl's movement, a burst of cheering broke out--only to be strangled at its birth. For as she pressed the spring which illuminated the lily, a blinding flash leaped from it, and the globe was shattered into a thousand fragments.

For a moment Carol stood holding the stem of the golden lily; then, with a little cry, she fell, a crumpled, pitiful wisp of white on the green carpet.

Quickly as Lord Oakby sprang to the door of the box, Paul was before him, and the two men raced up the corridor, through the entrance to the wings and on to the stage, where Vivian Dale, Crowdell, the stage manager, Nadia and a dozen others were gathered about the prostrate girl.

Pushing quickly through the group, Lord Oakby raised Carol in his strong arms, and carried her to her dressing-room, followed by Paul and Dale. In a moment they were joined by Doctor Saunders, the doctor retained by the management, who had fortunately been one of those who had come to see Carol's final stage triumph.

The others stood in silent suspense as the medical man made his examination. At last he turned to them.

"Ye'll not need to be alar-rmed," he said, in his dry, Scotch manner. "'Tis shock the girl's suffering from, chiefly. 'Tis a mercy you thing wasna nearer to her face..."

It might have been an accident that his eyes rested on Paul as he spoke. The latter, whispering a few words to Dale, left the room hurriedly, and the others watched the doctor as he applied restoratives.

In a few minutes Carol stirred and opened her eyes. Dr. Saunders, smiling quizzically, motioned to Oakby, who sprang forward and knelt beside the couch, pillowing the girl's head on his arm.

"Arthur!" she murmured, happily, and the doctor and Vivian Dale found important business to discuss in another corner of the room.

Barely a quarter of an hour had passed when Paul returned, to find his ward almost herself again, and coloring with pleasure at hearing that the great audience had refused to leave the theater until they had heard from Dale's lips that their idol had suffered no serious injury.

"I think," said Paul, significantly, "that Doctor Saunders will forgive my poaching on his preserves if I suggest that Carol would be none the worse for a rest. Meanwhile, Dale and I have a little matter to attend to. Perhaps you will be good enough to join us in Dale's office, Doctor?"

Leaving Carol, still too shaken to pay much attention to what was going on, though little the worse for her experience, in the charge of her dresser and her fiancé, Paul led the way to the comfortable room in which Dale transacted the business of the theater. Awaiting them they found Mademoiselle Nadia and Gilbert Crawdell. The actress and the stage manager were chatting easily together, but the shrewd Scottish doctor fancied that he perceived a certain anxiety beneath their light manner.

Paul, entering last, very composedly locked the door and handed the key to Vivian Dale, who took it and placed it on the writing table at which he seated himself.

"You weesh to see me, M'siu Dale?" asked Nadia, haughtily, who had watched these proceedings with scornful eyes.

"I did," replied Dale briefly. "Be good enough to sit down. Now, Mr. Pry..."

He paused expectantly.

Paul, whose pleasant face had grown very stern, nodded.

"I am obliged to you," he said, "for acting so promptly on my hint. I find that I was justified in my suspicions, and I think you will be surprised at what I have to tell you."

"*Je suis fatiguée*," protested Nadia, yawning. "If Mr. Pry like to tell a story I beg to be excuse--"

"Sit down!" said Paul sharply.

He did not raise his voice, but there was something in his cold, stern tone that silenced the woman, who paled beneath her rouge as she sank into her chair.

CRAWDELL, who had not spoken nor moved, took out his handkerchief and wiped his damp hands.

"It is not often," Paul resumed, "that one is able so quickly to solve what is undoubtedly an unusual problem; I have, however, been fortunate, and I hope that my explanation need occupy little more time than my investigations.

"I should first explain that I was not unaware that Mademoiselle Nadia was jealous of Carol. That, perhaps, was to be expected. Women like Mademoiselle do not lightly see their own fame eclipsed by that of another--however innocently. But I confess that I was not prepared for the ingenuity with which she attempted to revenge herself. With true feminine subtlety, she waited for the evening of her rival's final triumph, and hoped to deal her a worse blow than death.

"A tool was ready to her hand. Crawdell, as I had already observed, was passionately in love with her--so passionately that when she offered herself to him as the price of his help, he forgot his manhood, his honor, and helped her in one of the cruelest schemes I have ever heard of.

"Crawdell, as you, Dale, know, is an excellent stage manager. He believes in seeing to every detail himself, consequently the stage hands were not at all surprised when he insisted on supervising the arrangements for lighting the golden lily which was so effectively used by Carol at the conclusion of her dance. You may remember that some weeks ago the light in the lily nearly failed to act.

"Some defect was discovered just in time by Crawdell himself, and after that he got the electrician to teach him enough to allow him to look after the thing himself in future. Whether he himself contrived the original defect, or whether it suggested the eventual plot to Mademoiselle Nadia is immaterial. They evolved a plan as novel as it was fiendish. As you know, the current supplying the globe in the lily was conveyed by means of thin wires, invisible to the audience, from an electrical supply behind the scenes. For convenience, the ends of the wires terminated in a small plug which was fitted to a wire taken to a point not far from the stage.

"It was an obscure corner, where there was just light enough when the lights were down for a person to move without falling. Crawdell, as I have discovered, came to the theater early this morning, and busied himself with

the golden lily and the arrangements for lighting it. This occasioned no surprise, as he would naturally be anxious that nothing should go wrong on this night of all nights, and the staff were accustomed to what they described as his fussy ways.

"As a matter of fact, Crawdell, who had learned more about electricity than his teacher supposed, had fitted a wire to the main cable which conveys the enormously powerful current used for the great lights of the auditorium. You do not need to be electricians to understand that when this powerful current was passed into the globe in the lily, the globe could not stand it, and was instantly shattered. Nadia and Crawdell had observed that Carol always raised the lily to her face, and they naturally expected that the explosion would blind her--blind her at the moment of her triumph and on the eve of her wedding--"

Dale's fist crashing down on his table cut him short.

"What a hellish plot!" he cried.

Nadia and Crawdell had sprung to their feet, but Paul's hand came quickly from his pocket, holding an automatic pistol.

"Stay where you are," he commanded, "or I will shoot you with as little compunction as I would a pair of snakes! Dale," he went on, coolly, "the telephone is by your hand; if you will be good enough to ring up Scotland Yard and mention my name to Colonel Fairbody, the Assistant Commissioner, I have no doubt that he will send somebody round to take charge of these people."

Only Mademoiselle Nadia's quick breathing broke the silence until Dale's voice, speaking into the instrument, rang out sharply:

"Get me Scotland Yard, please-- quickly."

## Death's Advance Shadow By Arthur J. Burks



### *Detective John Kinnick Foretells His Own. Murder, But the Reaper Is Particular About Choosing Victims!*

JOHN KINNICK had always played his hunches, because he had learned that they never played him false. And he had a hunch now. It was a very simple one. He felt that he would die on his next tough case. There had been many signs pointing the way, little omens that John Kinnick, private detective, alone would have called omens.

Take that afternoon, only last week, when he had been walking down Park Avenue below Grand Central Station. In an apartment house across the street, men were hand-lifting pieces of board to the top floor, walking the boards up the windows. The man on the pavement outside the house lifted two narrow boards. The man at the window next above grabbed them,

leveled up the outer ends and lifted them for the next man to catch. And so on until the man on the top floor took them in through his window.

Even as John Kinnick watched, the man on the sixth floor dropped a board. It shot down like an arrow, and slammed into the sidewalk beneath. Luckily, no one was hurt. And Kinnick decided that if he hadn't crossed the street that board would have knocked him straight to kingdom come.

Then, only yesterday, there had been another of Death's advance shadows.

A group of men had started painting a sign, which was situated high on the face of a building. Their scaffolding was draped with canvas, and swayed back and forth as they walked upon it. The protective bar of the scaffold didn't look to be more than knee-high. The painters were careful as they worked.

Kinnick had held his breath. He had a fear of heights, though his work often made him force himself to forget it. Then he stopped and watched a man walk toward the end scaffold. Then he screamed as he saw what was happening. But it was too late.

The far end of the scaffold had slipped. The painter plunged to the street like a falling comet, landed on a pedestrian and killed him instantly. The falling man only suffered a few broken bones.

John Kinnick looked at the set face of the dead man. The deceased had just elbowed him back to pass through a narrow aisle formed by piles of cement sacks on the sidewalk.

Kinnick had twice been saved from death by something--his hunches.

And now his hunch was stronger than ever. He would die with his next case. That was why he was going to quit. Why should he stay at it? He was fifty years old, gray as a sheep when he should have had his original brown hair. His face was like granite. It showed the lines of the tough life he had led. He had struggled hard to save enough money against his old age.

When he retired he had always told himself, he wouldn't be a burden on Bob and Ann, his son and daughter-in-law. He had fifty thousand dollars in his bank. Enough to last him all his life.

BUT he wanted to live to enjoy that fifty grand. So, he was quitting.

Now, he sat behind the scarred old desk over which, for twenty-five years, he had transacted the business of the Kinnick Detective Agency--which had always been just himself. He hired no telephone girl, no accountants, no secretary. He never wrote letters, never answered any. He had a way of balancing his books, and keeping his income tax straight.

Nervously, he ran his hand over the top of the desk. Every mark on it meant something to him. There was a deep gouge to his right. That's where "Cokey" Morrissey had sent a slug at him. It would have got him if he hadn't had a sudden hunch when the door opened, and heaved the inkwell, diverting the killer's aim.

Kinnick had shot him expertly in the legs after Cokey had missed. He could still see the bloodstains, black as ink, on the floor in front of the desk. Wanted for murder, Morrissey had burned.

There were mementoes on the wall, of the crimes John Kinnick had solved. Pictures of famous crooks, wanted men and women. There were newspaper clippings, pictures of heroes of the police force. His office was almost a museum. Maybe, when he retired, he would maintain the place for exactly that reason.

He felt pretty sentimental about it. He hated to leave. His hunch, though, went further. When he made up his mind and finally walked out, he must never come back, even on a visit. If he did, he would die. Of course, it was silly. But then, all his hunches had seemed silly, and they had always worked out.

He sighed then and rose to his arrow-straight six feet of slim manhood. His body was still that of the twenty-five-year-old, ambitious fellow who had started this agency twenty-five years before.

"But this is the end," he promised himself. "I'm finished. Me for the quiet life. Boredom will kill me, but it won't kill me as fast as my next case."

He hesitated. It was certainly hard to leave the scene of his life's work. He hesitated, because in that moment he wasn't sure about something. Maybe it would be better to get bumped off on his next case, instead of spending the rest of his life in absolute boredom.

HE SAT down a minute to think it over. Suddenly, the door began to open. John Kinnick stiffened. The door opened slowly, as though someone dreadfully afraid was getting up the courage to enter.

Kinnick half-smiled when he saw the girl. And for just a moment he thought it was his twenty-two-year-old daughter-in-law, Ann. The girl even reminded him of his wife, Madge, who had died so many years before. She couldn't be Madge, of course, nor Ann either. Ann was a blonde. This girl was a brunette. But the fact that he had thought of the dead Madge when he first saw Clare Gordon, he took to be another omen -- of his own death.

"It's no use, Sister," he said brusquely, before she could open her mouth. "No use even telling me about it. I'm going out of business, and if you insist I'll tell you why. But don't sit down because I'm soft-hearted and might listen to you too long. So, beat it, please. I'm shutting up shop."

She came toward him, letting her tongue moisten her dry lips. Her eyes were filled with a fear she was trying to hide. That fear crept into them when he had told her to beat it. Kinnick knew then that she had come to him because he was her last resort. But then, you couldn't keep taking them on. There would always be people coming to him as a last resort.

However, John Kinnick was a polite man, and he always had a sympathetic nature toward them. His heart went out to this girl, who was trying so hard to find words with which to express herself. Her hand trembled as she opened the clasp of her pocketbook, took out a handkerchief and touched her dry lips with it. John Kinnick took off his hat--a rare concession with him--and dropped it on the floor beside his scarred desk.

"Well," he said, sighing, "suppose you spill it. I can listen, anyway, and send you to someone I know who's as good or better than I am."

"My name is Clare Gordon," she began in a tremulous voice. "My Father has been kidnaped, maybe murdered, for all I know!"

"You're Cyrus Gordon's daughter?" Kinnick asked, a note of interest in his tone. "The retired lapidary?"

"Yes," she said simply.

"Then why don't you call the F.B.I.?" he demanded. "Or the cops?"

"You don't understand," she protested. "If you'll wait, I'll tell you. Father was under a cloud when he left. He was accused of smuggling jewels worth millions past the customs. He never told me much about it. But if I were to call in the police, and he were to be rescued, he might face a jail sentence."

"Then you think he's guilty?" said Kinnick softly.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Her lips trembled.

"I don't know! I don't know!" she burst out. "But three days ago he told me that no matter what happened to him--and he plainly expected something--I was not to notify either the police or the government."

"Sounds silly," he said, shrugging. "But what do you want of me?"

"I want you to get him back."

"Has there been a ransom demand?"

"Yes. At least that's what I think it was. Whoever is holding him wants those jewels within seventy-two hours. The deadline is three in the afternoon, three days from now. I got the telephone call just before I came here. I'd heard my father speak of you many times, so I came here. If you promise not to call the F.B.I., Customs Officials, or the police...."

"I promise nothing," he said grimly. "I'm out of business. It'll be better if I send you to someone else."

"But can't you take just this one last case?" she pleaded. "What difference will just one more make? And besides, twenty-five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"That will be my fee?" he asked softly, then added hurriedly, "*If* I turn damn fool and take the case?"

"Yes. It's my own money. I've always had a large allowance, and some inherited money of my own from my Mother."

John Kinnick reached down for his hat.

"No," he said, "and I'll tell you why. I'm quitting because I'm a guy who believes in his hunches. I'm going to be killed on my next case. Therefore, there'll be no next case. I never miss when it comes to hunches. Even this is part of the hunch. When you came in I thought you were Madge, my wife who's been dead for years. Then, there have been other things. Nix, Clare, I'm finished with being a private detective."

Clare put her handkerchief back in the pocketbook. She straightened, threw her shoulders back and stood up a bit unsteadily.

Walking stiff and straight as a soldier, Clare Gordon moved toward the door. Her shoulders shook a little. She was beautifully dressed, Kinnick noticed. A beautiful young girl.

"Clare," he said softly. "Clare Gordon. Come on back here!"

SHE turned slowly and went back. Her eyes were empty, sad. "I'm a fool," he told her. "I'm a sucker for tears and a pretty face. I guess I always have been. Give me the lowdown, and I'll get to work."

"I can't ask you to do it, Mr. Kinnick," she said. "If you're so sure about that hunch of yours.... Well, my Dad wouldn't like it, either. Why would he want to live, if a man died to save him?"

"Would it make any difference to you?" he asked. He looked deep into her soft blue eyes.

"No, it would mean nothing to me," she said honestly. "You could die, if you got him back, and I'd lose no sleep over your death. He's my Dad. And others could die too, and I'd still lose no sleep if he came back to me."

"That," said Kinnick, "is how a girl *should* feel about her Dad. If you had put it any other way, I wouldn't even have sent you to one of my detective friends. As it is, give me the lowdown. In the first place, have you noticed anyone following you?"

Her eyes widened.

"Why--why I never even looked around!" she gasped. "Why would anybody follow me? I haven't done anything. I haven't gone to the police."

"But you've come to John Kinnick, who occasionally does an even better job than the police. And if I were the gents holding your Dad, I think I'd have someone watching you--just in case you did something of the sort. And because of the business they're in, they'd at least know about me."

"Then, no matter what your decision, you were already in this the minute I came here?" she asked.

"Oh, no, not at all! If you'd gone out crying, they might have thought that you hadn't got anywhere. On the other hand, they might think I'd put you up

to an act. And besides, it doesn't matter what they think. Can you tell me where the jewels your Dad is supposed to have copped are cached?"

"I don't know," she said, "But I've taken everything out of his safe. Maybe these will help you."

She opened that pocketbook again, and dumped a pile of diamonds, rubies and emeralds on his desk. Kinnick swore in silence.

"Now I am in for it," he growled. "You brought them for me to hold?"

"Or to deliver to the kidnapers. It all depends on what you decide to do."

"It has all been decided for me," he said heavily. "Go home now, and wait until you hear from somebody."

"Who?"

"Your Dad, or myself. Probably your Dad."

Thanking Kinnick volubly, she left his office with new hope.

Frowning, the detective went to the window and peered down at the street. His Police Positive pressed hard against his left armpit as he did so. He saw Clare cross the sidewalk, step into a long black limousine. He couldn't see whether there was anyone else in it, but there had to be, because she got in the back door. The chauffeur had no manners, though, or he'd have been out to hold it open for her. But what if--

He whirled to the desk, pushed all the stones into a drawer, slammed it shut and went down the steps faster than he ever had done so before. He had only caught a glimpse of the license, but it didn't matter too much. He would know that car anywhere. A simple little thing, like a chauffeur, not holding the door for his boss, told him that something was amiss.

He grabbed a taxicab.

"Catch that black car!" he snapped, pointing ahead through the traffic on Broadway. "Police business."

BUT they were caught by the first red light. Kinnick, looking straight ahead and keeping his eye on that car, scarcely noticed it when the door opened and a man slid in beside him. But he knew the feel of a pistol muzzle pressing against his side. He turned and looked into the smiling face of a young man dressed in natty clothes. The stranger had nice white teeth, and a merry twinkle in his deep black eyes. But Kinnick knew that those eyes were deadly as a jungle beast.

"Nice going, shamus, don't you think?" he said smoothly. "But you should have stuck to your hunch. Oh, I heard everything. I was listening outside your office door. I got away in time to watch things here. Of course, I could have let you go ahead, but this is better. Gives us a chance to get acquainted."

DEFTLY, the fellow took Kinnick's Police positive from his left shoulder holster, hefted it and dropped it in his own pocket.

"Call me Count, Kinnick," he said. "How can we talk if we don't know each other's names? A pal of mine will be along later. His name's Percival. But don't let the name fool you. He just stayed behind to go through that trick desk of yours." He paused, went on: "Well, what did the dame say?"

"You heard, didn't you?" Kinnick said.

"Yes, but not everything."

"I've nothing to say," said Kinnick staunchly.

"Then, in that case, what's the use of me trying to be sociable?"

Grinning wolfishly, he reversed his gat and slugged Kinnick on the side of the head, so hard that John's lights went out. And when they came on again

he was in a musty cellar somewhere, and things were happening-- a lot of things that he did not like. He knew now that his hunch was probably right, for it was pretty obvious that he would never get out of this alive.

None of the crooks wore masks. They didn't seem to care what anybody else saw and remembered--even Clare. Even Cyrus Gordon, who appeared to have gone through a lot of roughing up. Like himself, Gordon and his daughter were expertly tied with rope.

"We'll settle everything," Count Newton announced, "when Percy gets here with the rocks. You people were awful tough about it, and the dame didn't obey our orders. Yes, tough for everybody, including the shamus who didn't follow his last hunch."

Kinnick didn't like the way he spoke the last two words.

Percival came in then, and he looked pretty sour.

"It's a trick desk," he said. "There's nothing in it. I couldn't even find what happened to the stuff after he dumped it. I guess we'll have to sweat it out of them, Count. It's the only way I know of. We'd better start with Kinnick."

Newton came over to Kinnick, grinning with sadistic expectancy. He kicked the private investigator savagely on the shins. First one, then the other. Tied to the chair, Kinnick had to take it. Then Newton slugged him in the mouth and nose. It was terribly painful, but it didn't knock him out. The leader of the gang grinned amiably. He was a pretty cold, deadly killer.

"How does the desk work, Kinnick?" he snapped.

Kinnick looked at Cyrus Gordon.

"You have a legal right to those rocks, Gordon?" he asked.

"Yes, but for heaven's sake give them up!" Gordon begged him. "I could stand it myself, but with Clare here ... Tell them what they want to know."

"When I take a case," said Kinnick, "I never compromise. Especially with rats."

But when Percival and Newton finished with him he was a complete wreck. Cyrus Gordon was swearing in a low terrible voice. Clare was weeping, begging.

"Tell them, Mr. Kinnick!" she said in a tearful voice. "I won't see you killed."

"Those rocks," Kinnick mumbled painfully, "are our bodyguards. We've got to hang onto 'em. These rats get them, and we're done. You were done when you saw their faces, Gordon. If you don't hold out, you're sunk. Same with your daughter, and with me. It's the rocks they want, don't you see?"

COUNT NEWTON didn't wait any longer. He stared in hurt surprise at Kinnick, as though amazed that a man could plan to die so coldly. Sighing in mock regret, he knocked the detective out with a right cross to the jaw. And when Kinnick opened his eyes again, Cyrus Gordon was out too. Count Newton was talking to the girl now.

"He's a sucker for a girl, Sister," he was saying. "When he comes to, I'm going to do some work on you that won't be so pleasant. Then he'll talk to save your good looks. So you'd better start begging now."

John Kinnick knew what he had to do. He had to play possum, think, and make plans. Deftly, his hands began to fumble with his bonds. Under one puffy eyelid he peered at the mob of killers. There were six of them, all armed. He could see his own Police Positive still weighting the right-hand pocket of Newton's coat. If only he could get to it.

There was nothing else for him to do. He had to make a try for that gun, somehow. If he told where the jewels were hidden, they were all as good as dead. That amiable grin of Newton's had made the matter quite clear. But Kinnick didn't make his return to consciousness known to his captors immediately. He kept up his stertorous breathing all the time, until he felt sure he could free his hands. Not his ankles, but his hands. They'd see him if he tried to free his ankles.

It took time, and a great deal of pain, but finally he worked his hands free. But he still refrained from going into action. He had to wait and hope--hope that Clare could take it. It all depended on her courage and stamina, if they were to regain their freedom.

Kinnick groaned audibly, signaling to the crooks that he was conscious once more. Newton turned and faced him, that grin still on his face.

"Have you decided to talk, Kinnick?" he demanded.

"I don't care what you do to any one of us," Kinnick snapped back. "I'm not talking."

"No?" Newton said. "Okay, Percy. Go ahead."

Percival was smoking a long cigarette. Grinning evilly, he walked over to Clare. And without the slightest compassion he pressed the lighted end of the cigarette into her forearm. Clare simply glared at him. She made no outcry for mercy, did not even wince.

Cyrus Gordon swore savagely, mouthing strong oaths. But Count Newton slugged him again, knocking him out cold.

Percival touched the girl again, twice, outlining the three points of a triangle on the fair white skin of her forearm. This time she shuddered at the cruel pain.

"If you don't talk fast, Kinnick," Newton warned him, "we won't be so easy on the girl. The next time Percival uses that cigarette it'll be in her eyes. Well? What do you say?"

"I'll blow the whistle," said Kinnick, "if you'll let the girl alone. You could burn her to pieces, but when it comes to eyes.... Well, I have ideas about eyes. Burns will heal and eyes won't. I have a stipulation though...."

Count Newton's smile faded perceptibly.

"You're in no position to bargain," he said grimly.

"I always talk over a weighty decision with myself," Kinnick said garrulously, "before I find the right words to explain just what I'm driving at. It's like that now. I'm going to talk, but I'm not going to hurry." He watched Count Newton thoughtfully.

"If you're going to spill, Kinnick, why waste time?" Newton snapped. "Let's have it, or I'll kick your teeth out."

KINNICK'S heart hammered with excitement as he watched Count Newton. The mob leader was becoming more and more edgy.

"If you did that it would take me even longer," he said tauntingly.

Count Newton moved like a tiger. He grabbed Kinnick by the shoulders, started to yank him erect. Kinnick clung to the back of the chair with his free hands, so that Count Newton would not know, too soon, that his hands were free.

As Newton yanked him up, Kinnick's arms shot around the killer. His left hand shot into Newton's right-hand pocket, came out with the comfortable feel of his own Police Positive resting against his palm. He jammed the gun muzzle in the killer's side. Newton tried to pull free and tug at his own gat.

"Get on either side of him!" the frightened killer yelled. "Drill him in the legs! Get him off me!"

"I'll fill your boss full of slugs if one of you hoods make a move," Kinnick promised.

The other men exchanged glances. Kinnick was holding Count Newton tightly, very tightly. This fact seemed to reassure them. Percival grinned, lifted his gat.

"Hold him, Kinnick," he said. "We'll drill him. That'll save an extra cut. Now you can tell us what the score is!"

Count Newton swore savagely, still trying to yank away. With deadly aim, Kinnick fired. Percival went down with a neat hole in his forehead. His gat exploded, sending a bullet into the wall.

"That was just Percy talking, Count!" yelled one of the others. "We're sticking with you!"

But Newton had gone insane at Percival's hint of a double-cross. Even the menace of the Police Positive in his side did not deter him. He slugged his way clear, and John Kinnick fell, all entangled with the chair again, which held his ankles imprisoned. Knowing he had set himself an impossible task, Kinnick started throwing lead, careful to throw it where it wouldn't hit the Gordons.

Lead was smashing at him, too, and he was trying the best he could to dodge the slugs in his twisted position. A bullet burned along his left side. It was too deep for comfort. He held his gun in his right hand now. He was getting a trifle dizzy.

One of the double-crossing hoods threw a slug at Newton, missed. Snarling, Newton shot him in the belly, then ran to him and kicked the gun out of his hand. Then he kicked him again, in the jaw this time. The man died after that.

That diversion of Newton helped, and Kinnick got another hood. He also got another slug in him, in his right shoulder. It sort of numbed his whole right side. Slugs were hammering at him, plumping into him from everywhere, he thought. And through a haze of descending darkness he could see Clare watching him, horror in her face. She, like Kinnick, must be remembering his hunch--and realizing that it was working out here.

Kinnick began to crawl toward her, pausing as he crawled to fire at one member of the gang. The hood went down, his guns still blazing. Kinnick kept right on firing, and men kept firing at him. He got the gun that Newton had kicked out of the hand of the man he had shot in the belly.

It seemed a good idea, sort of poetic justice, for him to shoot Count Newton in the belly with it, too. Just as Newton started to run behind Clare to keep

away from this hideous, twisted, crawling thing--with the remnants of a chair fastened to its ankles--that bullets did not seem able to stop, Kinnick fired.

Count Newton fell against Clare, knocking her over. Kinnick heard her head hit the floor. But he didn't hear any more shooting after that. He figured that he would never hear firing again, or anything else for that matter. Unless it was the angels playing on their harps.

SILLY, he thought, thinking things like that. But he didn't mind. All the noise that had been made by the shooting would bring somebody. He was glad, since his hunch had been right, that he could pass out for a gal who looked and behaved so much like Madge would have, or Ann. Then blackness claimed him for its own....

When John Kinnick regained consciousness he didn't see any angels, or hear any harps. He simply heard a man say: "By all rights he should be a dead man, but his kind are plenty tough."

Kinnick heard the distinctive sound a nurse's uniform makes when she walks, He smelled disinfectants. His entire body ached like the devil. Then he opened his eyes. There were quite a few people around, including the cops. He spotted Detective-lieutenant Masterson.

"Did you find the rocks in Percival's inside pocket?" he managed to say.

"How did you know where they were, Mr. Kinnick?" a girl's voice asked.

He turned and looked at Clare.

"My desk wasn't a trick desk," he said. "I knew Percival got them and was planning a double-cross. He knew that I knew. And when I didn't say anything, he knew I was going to wait for the breaks. And when I made my move, he pulled his stuff. He was sure he could beat any breaks in my favor.

I thought he could, too, but it was my only chance. Even free, I couldn't possibly have beaten the whole mob."

"I'm not so sure you couldn't," said Clare, smiling happily.

"He'd have licked them to a frazzle!" said another voice which made him turn and look toward the other side of the cot--into the proud, concerned faces of Ann and his son, Bob. He shook his head.

"They're no good any more, kids," Kinnick said. "My hunches, I mean."

"How so?" Bob asked.

"I had a hunch that if I took another case I'd be bumped off. Of course"--he looked a bit hopefully at the doctor--"maybe it has, at that. If I'm not going to live, Doc--"

"Your chances were ninety-nine to one against," said the Doctor, "when you got here. You were as good as dead. Yes, my friend, you were a gone gosling. But now, I'm damned sure you'll live to be a hundred. If those bullets didn't kill you, nothing will."

John Kinnick grinned happily.

"Then everything's all right," he said. "I wouldn't be able to go on being a detective, if I couldn't depend on my hunches."

"You mean, Mr. Kinnick," Clare gasped, "that in spite of what you've just been through, you're not going to retire?"

"Retire?" he repeated. "Why should I? Now that I've passed the danger spot I'll never be killed. So, when your Dad gets kidnaped again, come right to me, will you? Say! Did your Father go to the customs officials about that smuggling charge?"

"Yes," Clare answered, and there was a note of relief in her voice. "He's going to take his medicine. His lawyer said he'd probably only have to pay a heavy fine, that Dad would receive a suspended prison sentence. Dad's certainly learned his lesson all right. He'll behave from now on."

Everybody, it seemed, felt swell about everything--and John Kinnick felt especially thankful to have escaped a life of certain boredom.

The Murder Masterpiece By G. T. Fleming-roberts



*Fulton Xavier's sensational statue struck chill terror into those who beheld it. The face was a contortion of agony. It was as if the twisted lips, the gasping mouth choked on a shriek that was beyond utterance--as if that hideous thing in bronze was a tormented soul captured in metal!*

STANDING alone in front of the statue, Edmund Neymores could scarcely tear his eyes from the thing. "The most masterly presentation of hideous grotesqueness I have ever seen. Beyond the conception of the normal brain." he muttered.

It was ten minutes past closing time at the Art Institute. Most of the evening, Neymores had spent watching the people as they crowded around Xavier's sensational statue. It is not often that a totally new artist achieves a masterpiece. But Neymores had noticed that not a single person in the crowd could suppress a shudder upon looking at the thing of bronze. One old beggar woman had actually fainted. Mentally, Edmund Neymores resolved to hit that statue hard in his general interest column in tomorrow's paper.

The statue was the naked figure of a man lying on his back, knees drawn up close to his belly, arms twisted, and fingers knotted together. Every muscle was craftily molded. The bronze face was a contortion of agony. The twisted lips, the gaping mouth seemed to indicate that the figure was choking on a shriek that was beyond utterance.

"It--it's not a statue," Neymores muttered with a grimace. "It's a tormented soul captured in metal!" His eyes dipped to the placard at the base of the thing:

MAN IN PAIN

by

## FULTON XAVIER

There was something about the hands--Neymores forced himself to touch them. An altogether inexplicable sensation of repugnance passed over him. Yes, there were only nine twisted fingers--not an oversight on the artist's part, for there was a sort of a stump where the digit had been. Xavier had followed his model in perfect detail. *That* was what made Neymores shudder. It wasn't the statue itself. Where, in the name of heaven, had Xavier got his model?

He turned abruptly and clicked across the polished floor. Yes, he'd hit "Man in Pain" hard in tomorrow's paper. Time that art, too, made some effort to get back to normalcy!

At the bottom of the steps leading to the boulevard, Neymores met Jasper Felps. a man who occupied the apartment adjacent to his. Neymores detained him. "Have you seen the exhibit yet?" he asked. Jasper Felps snarled; "Hell, yes! what a nightmare! And that thing made by Xavier. I'll never get it out of my mind! But knowing who made it, I'm not surprised."

Jasper Felps had no reason to love Fulton Xavier, Neymores knew. There was something about a fraudulent business deal in which Xavier and Felps had both had a hand. Then came the law. The wealthy Mr. Xavier was above reproach. Felps took the brunt of the burden--prison and ruin. The disgrace of it all had killed Felps' father. But Xavier had waxed fat, hoarded the profit, and maintained the respect of the world. Now, at fifty, Jasper Felps was a hard working electrician. At forty-eight, Xavier had retired to dabble in art and music, to give money lavishly to charities, to inherit the immortality that a public benefactor sometimes unjustly deserves.

"I've my car here, Felps," Neymores offered.

"Thanks, but I'm not going home now." And Jasper Felps hurried off in the opposite direction.

"Funny kite," Neymores muttered. He lighted a cigar and walked slowly down the street to where his car was parked. He snapped open the door of his car, put his foot on the running board, and suddenly jerked back. He stood there staring at some black, misshapen object that huddled on the cushions of the front seat. From the gloom within the sedan, a thin, white hand darted out. Fingers, sharp and pointed as claws, clutched at his coat sleeve. A gray, shriveled face, beaded with tiny black eyes, peered up at him from between strands of dirty, disheveled hair.

"Good Mr. Neymores," came a thin, crackling voice. "Munchy always called ye good Mr. Neymores, and I know you'll help me and my Munchy, won't ye, Mr. Neymores?"

Neymores fumbled along the door post, found the dome light switch, and pressed it on. As he had judged from the voice, the person who had appropriated the front seat of his car was an old woman. She was wearing a ragged dress of filthy silk stuff, and, in spite of the warm night, a plaid shawl was tied over her head. He recognized her immediately as the woman who had fainted in the Art Institute that evening. Aside from that, he could not remember ever seeing her before. As for "her Munchy" he hadn't the slightest idea to whom she had referred.

It was mere curiosity that prevented him from sending the woman about her business. The city abounded with creatures of this kind--some who deserved charity, and others who counterfeited both their ailments and their poverty. Neymores did not reply at once. He closed the door of the sedan, walked around, and got in under the wheel. Then he asked, "Just what is the matter? Who is Munchy?"

"Why you know Munchy!" the old woman shrilled. "He's my son. You buy all your pencils from him."

Neymores remembered now. Munchy must be the ageless blind man who stood at the corner of Eighth, and Wentworth Streets. And that was very strange! During the past week, Neymores could not remember seeing Munchy at his accustomed post. "Is Munchy sick?" he inquired.

"No-no," the woman whimpered. "He's gone. For ten days he has not come back."

Neymores' mind fired with sudden inspiration. "Tell me," he said earnestly, "why you fainted in the institute when you saw Xavier's statue."

"I do not know what you mean," whimpered the woman. "But I know that the metal man all curled up on his back looked like my Munchy!"

Neymores pressed a five dollar bill into the crone's hand. That would keep her from starving. "Now, you'll have to go," he told her. "I'll see what I can do to find your son." He had suddenly remembered that the blind man had one missing finger on his left hand!

That settled it! Beyond a doubt, Munchy had served as the model for Xavier's "Man in Pain." But by what hellish torment had this perverted artist twisted the placid features of the blind man into a resemblance of the hideous metal thing that had caused a sensation at the exhibit? What had become of Munchy since the completion of the statue?

Neymores hurried the old woman from his car. Then, he drove to the nearest telephone booth, called the Missing Persons Bureau, and described the blind pencil vender.

SHERINGHAM COURT belies its grand name. It is something of a Soho mixed with the tinselled finery of a Montmartre together with a filth and squalor all its own. Here, artists and scribblers have made their dwellings and have counterfeited the Bohemian life. Among all this tawdriness, Sheringham Court boasts one building where money created something that was genuinely picturesque--Fulton Xavier's new studio. Faced with clean stucco, the upper stories jut out three feet beyond the lower. Glazed tile insets, attractive green shutters, and blossoming window boxes all contributed their bit towards brightening up what would ordinarily have been called a drab city street.

As the steady thrum of Neymores' car stopped in front of the Xavier studio, soft melodious music floated to his ears. He listened for a moment. An organ was playing "In a Monastery Garden." Neymores knew that it was Fulton Xavier himself who played. Why? Because the full-bodied bass notes were entirely lacking. For all Xavier's money could not manipulate those wooden organ pedals. Xavier could not walk. A railroad accident had robbed him of his legs.

Knocking at the studio door brought a servant. "I am sorry," said the man, "but Mr. Xavier is not here."

"I am sorry," retorted Neymores, "but I know that he is here." He elbowed his way into the hall. "Please inform him that I am from the *Evening Record*. I would like to interview him in regard to his sensational statue, 'Man in Pain.' "

"I will see, sir," said the servant. He turned stiffly and left the room.

Neymores listened carefully. The organ continued to play a few more bars, then stopped abruptly. Neymores smiled. Fulton Xavier had one weakness--vanity.

The servant re-entered the hall to inform Neymores that Mr. Xavier would see him in the conservatory.

Passing through a small library, Neymores was ushered into the presence of Xavier himself.

Fulton Xavier was seated in a high-backed chair. A woolen robe covered his lap and dropped to the floor concealing the stumps of his amputated legs. His domelike head was hairless and his beetling black brows divided equally his pink forehead and white face. His features were hard, his lips colorless. His smile was an artificial thing devoid of all pleasantness.

"You have, then, seen 'Man in Pain?' " he inquired immediately.

"I have," replied Neymores. "It is hideous. If you conceived it, I am tempted to say that yours is not a strictly normal brain!"

Color flamed across Xavier's parchment face. "You--you dare--" he sputtered.

"I would dare much to discover what has become of a certain blind pencil vender who has been missing for the past ten days."

"Why, damn you! What has that to do with me? Why do you come here with your blind beggars? I know no one who sells pencils! Impertinence to the greatest genius of all times!" The man's wrath shook the massive chair in which he sat.

"I have had the impertinence to inform the police of the disappearance of that blind beggar. I have proof that Munchy--that is his name--was the model for 'Man in Pain.' Suppose, Mr. Xavier, that they should find Munchy--dead. Your bronze statue can be identified beyond a doubt as the image of that blind man--distorted though his features are by pain and torment. Murder, Mr. Xavier, is an unpleasant word!" Neymores crossed the room to the wealthy art patron's chair. His hand descended heavily on the man's shoulder. "An unpleasant word, but one I shall be forced to use over the telephone in five minutes unless you give me information concerning the man who modeled for your statue!"

The shoulder beneath Neymores' hand shook with silent sobs. "I know nothing of your beggar. Why do you torment me? Money, I know! Here--" he fumbled in his inner coat pocket and tugged out his check book. "How much do you want?"

"Perhaps," said Neymores in an icy tone, "I am the first man you have ever met whom you cannot buy. But I am only the first. You have not met the gentlemen of the homicide squad, I take it."

With an angry motion of his hand, Xavier threw aside the woolen robe, seized two small, rosewood crutches that leaned against the arms of his chair, and squirmed to the floor. Balancing himself on his stumps, he looked up at Neymores. Tears filled his eyes. "Look at me," he implored. "Just look at me--dwarfed in the very prime of life, perfectly helpless. Yet you would take the one thing that is dearest to my heart away from me."

"Answer my question and I will leave this house at once. Where is Munchy?"

"Damn your Munchy!" Xavier seized the tail of Neymores' coat and shook it angrily. Then anger passed. His face once more became the color of parchment, The dark eyes darted furtively about the room. Again, he tugged at Neymores' coat. "If I tell you a secret that only two human beings know, will you promise to leave me alone and keep silent?"

Neymores hesitated. "If you do not confess a crime, I can promise."

"Come then," said Xavier; and using his crutches with remarkable skill, he hopped across the room towards the door at the rear. He opened the door and hopped into a small, brilliantly lighted chamber that was obviously his work shop. Unformed and partly formed lumps of clay were heaped upon low work tables. Clay smeared smocks and modeling tools littered the room. Xavier stumped over to one of the tables, picked up a small clay figure, and held it above his head. It might have represented a man, but so ill-formed, so utterly lacking in proportion that Neymores could not be certain.

"This," said Xavier, "is my masterpiece!"

Neymores stared at the thing. Xavier was completely insane. A child could have fashioned a more perfect image in mud; and whatever could be said against "Man in Pain," it was certainly perfectly proportioned and complete in every detail.

"Fool, don't you see!" Xavier shouted. "This is the finest thing I have ever done. You are learning the inmost secret of a genius!" He paused, moistening his colorless lips. "My one ambition was to be a great sculptor. I dreamed of art unborn--yes, dreamed until I believed myself to be an artist. Some day I would see my name upon the most sensational statue ever exhibited in America. All this, I saw in my dreams. Now, do you understand why I could not have seen the man who modeled for 'Man. in Pain?' greatest hoax of the age. Today, Xavier is on the lips of every art critic. Yet, here in my hand, I hold my masterpiece!" With an oath, he hurled the clay thing to the floor where it shattered to bits.

"You mean," said Neymores softly, almost compassionately, "that you were not the artist who fashioned 'Man in Pain?' "

Slowly, Xavier nodded his head. "That is my secret"

UNDERSTANDING crept over Neymores. Xavier, who had bought what the world would sell, had been thwarted in his greatest ambition. He had been denied the artistic skill for which he longed. Yet, even greater than his longing for artistic expression, was his hunger for fame as an artist. Insane? Of course--the insanity of strange vanities, grandiose illusion!

"Then, if you did not make the statue, who did?"

Earnestly, Xavier replied, "I have no more idea than you. He is a man with a long, yellow beard. Sometimes I fancy he is the reincarnate Leonardo Da Vinci. He came to me, told me that he was a great sculptor to whom fortune had been unkind. I made him this proposition: If he would create works of art in my name, I would pay him a large sum of money. His studio is directly below this one. He has a secret entrance, and no one knows that he is the real sculptor of my statues!"

"Then I--"

A half-muffled scream broke through Neymores' sentence. It sounded as if it came from the floor at his feet "What was that?" he snapped.

Xavier stood stiffly on his stumps, every sense alert. "It--it sounded like a woman."

Neymores sprang to Xavier, seized him by the shoulders, and shook him until his teeth rattled. "Have you ordered any more of your damned statues?" he snarled.

Xavier's eyes' bulged. He nodded, unable to speak.

"Good God!" The horror of what that scream portended slashed across Neymores' brain. This fiendish artisan who created Xavier's nightmares in bronze must torture his victims in some hellish manner in order that the metal faces of his finished products might reflect a pain beyond human conception. "We've got to get down there," he shouted in a frenzy. "He may be killing her, or--or something worse!"

Something behind Neymores creaked like a rusty hinge. A rasping shriek from Xavier. Neymores pivoted. Behind him, a door in the floor had opened. Standing on the edge of the yawning pit was a strange, foreboding figure--a man whose face was covered from eyes to chin with a mass of curling yellow hair. A white robe dropped from his shoulders to his feet--and it was spattered with crimson! In his right hand, he held a thick, black automatic. Not a sound passed his lips. He merely beckoned with one crooked finger of his left hand--beckoned towards the pit.

There was no mistaking his meaning. Neymores had seen the lust to kill in a man's eyes before. There was but one thing to do. He advanced towards the sinister, bearded figure. Evidently, Xavier, too, understood the meaning of the man's gesture. Neymores could hear him stumping along behind. Silently, the robed figure pointed to the opening. Looking down, Neymores saw a narrow flight of steel steps. Below was total darkness.

"I--I can't go down steps. You know that!" Xavier whimpered.

Still the crooked finger pointed. Xavier inched nearer the opening. Suddenly, the robed man's left hand shot out, gripped Xavier by the shoulder, twisted him around, and shoved him into the opening. The legless man was thrown down the steps. His hoarse cries of pain and terror blasted up from the darkness.

Lips within the yellow beard spoke.

"Intruder," the voice cut; "you know how to use steps."

Mechanically, Neymores obeyed. His feet found each step in turn as he worked his way down into the blackness. Below the stairs, he could hear Xavier groaning. When at last he found firm flooring beneath him, he heard

the trap above him close. Brilliant electric lights illuminated the room. Neymores involuntarily gasped at the strange spectacle that spread before him.

A glass vat fully twelve feet in length occupied the center of the room. He judged it to be cubical. It was filled within a foot of the brim with a brilliant blue fluid. Next to the great vat was an enameled basin eight feet long and half as wide. Lying stark naked in this basin was a man. His throat was slashed from ear to ear, and a crimson pool of his own blood bathed his body.

Bound and gagged in a straight chair was what first appeared to Neymores to be a negress. She was wearing a short, black tunic. Upon a second glance, he saw that the woman's features were obviously Caucasian. Face, body, and garment had been coated with some black substance. She was apparently unharmed and fully conscious, though her eyes were staring wildly at the ghastly scene.

NEYMORES jerked his eyes away. The shock of it all had numbed his wits. That was the one thing to be avoided at all costs! He forced himself to look calmly at the robed man. Evidently, while Neymores had been engrossed in the horrific revelations of the room, the bearded man had lowered a large metal cage over the recumbent form of Xavier. The latter, he noticed, had been stunned by his fall but was gradually coming around. Goldenbeard stood beside the cage, his automatic still in his hand. Pushing his foot between the bars of the cage, he goaded Xavier into consciousness. The cripple groaned and twisted to a sitting position.

"I am fulfilling your orders, Xavier," said the bearded one. "The subject of your second great work was to be 'Judgment.' It was to be composed of two life-size figures--a man and a woman. The man was to have the impassive face of a judge; the woman was to have the tortured features of the condemned. You will see how well I have chosen the models. The man in the basin was a worthless vagrant. He agreed to model for ten dollars. In

order to preserve his placid features, I was forced to take his life before the 'art work' began.

"Bound in the chair, you see the female subject. In spite of the liberal coating of graphite I have applied to her fair skin, you may be able to recognize her."

Xavier's eyes strained in an effort to see the woman in the chair. Suddenly, his lower jaw sagged open. "My God!" he breathed. "My daughter!"

"Your daughter," the bearded man mocked. "Hers shall be the immortality of bronze. This unfortunate intruder--" he indicated Neymores-- "I shall be forced to kill because he knows our methods--or can guess them.

"Then, I shall leave this building for all time. You will be left alone in this room--I will remove your cage from above--and there will be a little hint to the police. Though the police have not yet learned the truth about 'Man in Pain,' when they raid the Xavier studio, they will find the great Xavier, the great sculptor, surrounded by his victims in various stages of the process. Tonight, you sacrifice human beings on the altar of art! And no amount of denying, after your boasted art abilities, will ever convince the police that you are not the sole murderer of these unfortunates!"

As full realization of the bearded fiend's purpose flashed upon Neymores' mind, a shout burst from his throat. "You're crazy! You can't pull a stunt like this!"

"I correct you," said the bearded one. "I have pulled a stunt like this. Do you remember the blind pencil vender? He became immortalized as--'Man in Pain.' Do you wonder how I succeeded in capturing his tortured emotions in metal? I did it right here. In his blissful ignorance, Xavier supplied my every need--but did so in his own name. Do you wonder at my methods? Then, I am about to show them to you upon the person of Xavier's lovely daughter.

"But first, to manacle your hands--" Goldenbeard picked up a chain from the floor; stepped briskly behind Neymores, and ordered. "Hands behind you!"

With the fiend's gun jabbing into his back, there was nothing to do but obey. In another moment, the chain was tightened about his wrists and fastened with a padlock. Then strong cord was tied about his ankles.

The killer hurried to the wall; untied a strand of hemp rope, and pulled on it. Looking up at the ceiling, Neymores saw a metal hoist to which rope and grappling hooks were attached. The crane moved until it was directly above the chair in which the girl was bound. At the killer's manipulation, the grapples lowered, to the back of the chair.

He then crossed to the girl, fastened the hooks, saying as he did so, "Miss Xavier's body is coated with graphite which makes her an electrical conductor. To establish the connection, I fasten a metal band around her head--so. One of our wire leads goes to the metal head band. In the glass vat. we have a solution of blue vitriol and the second electrode in the form of a heavy copper plate. Current passing from one electrode to the other through the copper sulphate will deposit a film of copper upon the graphite-covered body of Miss Xavier. Now, the current we shall use will be small so that Miss Xavier can suffer exquisite pain without it killing her. In that way, we can capture every tortured expression, every convulsed muscle in the metal itself!"

Goldenbeard pulled on his ropes, and the chair containing the girl was hoisted into the air and wheeled above the tank containing the blue vitriol. Very slowly, the killer lowered the helpless girl towards the surface.

In his cage, Xavier clenched the bars, shouted, threatened, and hopped up and down until his face became purple. Neymores was too horrified at what he saw to do more than stare. The girl was lowered until one slender foot was immersed in the blue fluid. Then the killer crossed to an electrical switch and turned on the current. Muscles in the girl's foot tightened and twitched. Her blackened face instantly became seamed with lines of agony. The gag across her mouth did not fully suppress her scream. Beads of sweat glistened even through the graphite coating on her brow.

"Xavier!" Neymores whispered. "Xavier, if you can raise your cage up on edge a little. Try it. Try anything that will attract his attention."

Panic fled from the cripple's face. With a desperate effort, he wrenched at the base of the cage. It raised a few inches and dropped again into place.

FROM across the room, the bearded man saw what Xavier was trying to do. Yet Neymores knew that he dare not kill the cripple. If he did, there would be no logical place to rest the blame for the fiendish crimes. With a snarl, he leaped across the room. "Stop that!" he shouted. Xavier's arms snaked through the bars, fastened upon the fiend's smock, and clung there. The killer laughed at Xavier's determined efforts.

While they struggled, Neymores dropped to the floor, doubled himself up, and worked his long arms down towards his ankles. Inches more-- just inches; He had done the trick any number of times when he was a kid. He tried again and got his manacled wrists to the back of his heels. He contracted his muscles as much as possible. The chain slipped over his heels, over his toes, and came up in front of him. Another moment, and his fingers had ripped the cord from his ankles.

Then he was on his feet running up behind the killer. Xavier was giving the man so much trouble that it was not until Neymores was ready to spring that the bearded one had a chance to spring away. Neymores whirled his chained wrists above his head and brought them falling down. The steel chain caught the man in the head. It was probably mere accident that his automatic roared. Even as Neymores and the killer fell together, the reporter saw a red-eyed wound appear in the forehead of Fulton Xavier. The full weight of Neymores' body landed upon the killer's back. The man's gun skated across the floor.

Completely winded by the fall, it was a second before the killer could continue his resistance. As he squirmed over on his back in an effort to throw off Neymores, the reporter's manacled wrists beat down again. This time the steel links struck the man full in the face. Blood drooled from the corners of his mouth, drenching his beard with crimson. He lay perfectly still.

Neymores got to his feet. A glance showed him that the padlock connecting the loops of the chain about his wrists could be easily broken. His first thought, however, was for the girl. He ran across the room and yanked open the switch that controlled the electric current running through the vat of vitriol. Returning to the glass vat, he saw that her graphite-covered foot was already tinged with copper plate. Still, she was fully conscious. That was a good thing! With Xavier dead or dying with a wound in his head, Neymores would need a witness in his own behalf when the police arrived.

And, evidently attracted by the sound of a shot, the whole place was filled with blue coated police by the time Neymores had lowered the girl to the floor.

"Holy smoke!" gasped a fat sergeant as he clattered down the steps. "Will you look at the shambles! Why, it's the bright boy from the *Record*. How'd you get messed up in this, Neymores?"

"A long story," replied the reporter, "beginning with a missing pencil vender named Munchy."

"Yeah, I know. We were all posted to keep an eye open for him. Where is he?"

"Munchy is in the Art Institute--"

"Well, that's a fine place for a beggar," the sergeant interrupted.

"He was buried alive," continued Neymores, "in a sarcophagus that slowly crept upon him--a sarcophagus of copper to which a bronze finish was added for artistic effect."

The sergeant's eyes popped. "Say, that sounds crazy! Who's that old Father Time there on the floor with the whiskers on? Who's that gal? Who's the guy with the slashed throat?"

"The man in the basin was another subject to be electroplated. The girl is Miss Xavier. She's been covered with graphite preparatory to being

electroplated alive! 'Man in Pain' you will find to be Munchy, the pencil vender. He was also electroplated alive.

That is how the 'artist' managed to get that hideous expression on his 'statue's' face. But, quit asking questions and get that poor girl to the hospital They'll have to get that black stuff off of her.

"As to the killer, I believe he is a man who hated Xavier because of a business deal that ruined him and killed his father. He's crazy as a bedbug, but was clever enough to play on Xavier's vanity. He knew that sooner or later someone was bound to discover that Xavier's statues were simply the cadavers of murdered people plated with metal. Nobody but the killer and Xavier knew that Xavier wasn't the real creator of the statues. With Xavier's name plastered all over the statues, there wouldn't be a jury in the country that would believe Xavier was not the murderer. It was the bearded man's idea of vengeance--the disgrace of trial, the frantic and futile efforts to escape the chair, and eventually the death of the condemned but innocent man." Neymores crossed to where the bearded man lay. Seizing the yellow hair, he jerked it away. The pale face of Jasper Felps glared up at him.

The sergeant was a big man, a strong man. But for a long time, he stood there, his great body shaking.

## The Ten-dollar Hunch By Robert Sidney Bowen



*"Tip" Blake, Ace Federal Operative, Plays a Phony Sawbuck for a Sure Win!*

CLOTHES rumpled and soiled, a battered felt hat pulled low over one eye, "Tip" Blake, crack agent of the New York Undercover Squad of the F.B.I., Department of Justice, slouched along Clancy Street in the general direction of the East River. A chance glance at him by any passerby would have instantly listed him as a drunk stumbling merrily on his way. However, there was no whiskey inside of Tip Blake, nor was there the shade of a glaze in the steel-grey eyes he kept fixed on the stocky, well-dressed man some fifty to sixty yards ahead of him.

On the contrary, Blake was as sober as a deacon, and the thought of liquor was furthest from his mind. For over an hour now he had been shadowing "Snake" Saunders, and for good reason, too. Saunders was the one definite

link between the Federal man and a ring of counterfeiters who had been flooding New York with ten-dollar bills that were well-nigh perfect.

Counterfeiting, of course, comes under the watchful eye of the Treasury Department. But for once the T-men had run into a brick wall, and had appealed to the F.B.I. for assistance. Placed in charge of the case, Blake had worked night and day tracing down every possible clue.

THE sum total of his investigation produced one all-important fact. That was that Snake Saunders, a crook with a police record this long, was the "plate man" for the ring. In other words, when the plate was not being put to its illicit use, it was in Saunders' possession. He never let it out of his sight; for, were he to do so, the police would unquestionably find his body floating in the river some bright morning.

And so Blake was now tailing his man. True, he could very easily arrest Saunders and take him in for searching. But suppose the man did not have the plate on him. Then what? That was exactly the point--the one thing Blake wanted to avoid. It would tip the Department's hand to the ring, put Uncle Sam right back where he had started weeks ago. No, Blake had to make certain. Once he was, one way or the other, he would act accordingly.

If it was to go ahead, the three members of the New York Squad who were following the G-man would close in at a signal, help him make the arrest. But if not, then it would be a case of shadowing Saunders to where the plate was. And that, of course, would mean to where the plate was attached to the secret press, turning out more counterfeit tens.

Suddenly, Blake slowed his weaving pace even more, and his eyes brightened slightly. Saunders had turned into a cheap café at the corner of the next block. The neon sign outside read: "Black Bear Café, Wines and Liquors."

"Maybe you're getting the breaks early, Tip," he murmured to himself. "At least, it looks made to order for you."

Lurching forward he went down to the front of the café, gaped at the sign stupidly for a moment, then pulled out a handful of silver and goggled at it appraisingly. Then with a half nod and an unintelligible mumble for the benefit of those passing by, he went into the café and back to the bar at the rear. Saunders was there, watching the hard-faced barkeep mix him a drink.

Blake slapped a half dollar on the bar.

"Gimme a whiskey!" he mouthed. "And gimme it quick."

The barkeep didn't even look up.

"Keep your shirt on. This man was first."

Blake reeled along the bar, not so much as even looking at Saunders.

"Hey, do I get any service, or what?" he gurgled. "Ain't my dough good in this joint? Why, listen, when I was going good I could buy and sell you any day in the week. And you won't give me a drink, huh? Won't take my money? Say, what kind of a--"

The undercover agent didn't finish the rest. Leaning perilously over the edge of the bar, he let go, tried desperately to regain his grip and failed.

It was an act, of course, but it resulted in what he wanted. He went sprawling sideward against Saunders and, as though trying to save himself, he dragged the man down on the floor in a tangled heap.

Saunders cursed and hit him a hard clip on the head. Blake let out a yell and staggered up to his feet.

"What's the idea?" he mumbled thickly, as Saunders got up, red-faced with anger. "I slipped, and you was there. Couldn't you have been a gentleman and caught me? No, you had to clip me. And no guy's gonna clip me, see? Why, I've a mind to--"

Saunders had glanced at the barkeep, nodded. With surprising speed the man came from out behind the bar, grabbed Blake by the scruff of his neck

and the seat of his pants. In that position he propelled the undercover agent rapidly toward the door.

"Outside, drunk!" he growled. "And stay out, or you'll get hurt."

The last was accompanied by a violent shove, and Blake went skidding out onto the sidewalk. For a moment he sat there, waving one fist around in the air at the bartender, still scowling at him from inside the doors.

"You can't do this to me!" Blake bawled. "I'll see my lawyer and sue you for every dime you got. You just wait and see if I don't!"

At that point the cop on the beat prodded Blake with the end of his nightstick.

"Get up and beat it, before I run you in!"

Blake didn't argue. With deliberate slowness he obeyed, until he'd reached the next corner. Once around it, he picked up speed. Thirty minutes later he mounted the stairs of an old building over on Ninth Avenue and paused for a moment before a door marked "Jones & Co., Export and Import." Then he entered, hardly noticing the young woman seated at a typewriter desk in the outer office, and passed on in through a door marked "Private."

A lean-faced, middle-aged man behind a desk looked up as he entered, instantly rose from his chair. He was Hardy, chief of the New York Squad, and the fake offices were the headquarters of the squad. There was no surprise on Hardy's face, only grim interest.

"What luck?" he asked shortly.

Blake dropped into a chair, rubbed his slightly swollen cheek, and fished for a cigarette.

"A strikeout, Chief," he said presently. "I tailed Saunders to a cheap café, and pulled the lunging drunk act. Spilled him down onto the floor, and got

thrown out on my ear. But while we were on the floor I had the chance to go over him with my hands. No soap. He didn't have the plate on him."

The chief knitted his brows. "And that means," he grunted, "that it's being used to print more of the stuff."

"Most likely." Blake nodded. "That's why I came straight back here instead of tailing Saunders some more when he came out. It would have been too much of a risk, anyway, after tangling with him. Besides, Williams and the two with him can do the job just as well."

"Which means you've got a better idea," the chief said tersely. "Well, what is it?"

The undercover ace studied his cigarette for a moment.

"We're sure that Saunders is the plate man, Chief," he said slowly, "but we're not sure whether he has anything to do with the others when he isn't carrying the plate. We might follow him for days and he wouldn't go near their print shop, wherever it is. In other words, I've got to make him take me there. After all, we want the ringleaders, as well as the plate."

"And what is your plan?" the chief demanded.

Blake reached over and picked up a ten-dollar bill on the desk in front of his superior. He studied it a moment, squint-eyed.

"This is the plan," he said, and held up the bill. "This is one of the bills of that bunch that Treasury man, Collins, was trying to work his way into."

"And later had his throat slit from ear to ear," the chief said grimly.

Blake nodded. "Exactly," he said. "But they never knew he was a Treasury man. Collins was killed because they thought he was a member of some other gang, trying to work his way in and doublecross them. If you'll recall, his body was found in front of Scar Brophy's place. Though Brophy swore up and down he'd never seen Collins before, it was in the papers that the police believed that Collins' murder had been a gang revenge killing."

"That's true," Hardy grunted. "And the Treasury Department never admitted that Collins was one of their men. They thought it best not to let it be known. It might have scared the ring to cover. But what's all this got to do with your plan?"

Blake smiled faintly, traced one fingertip around the edge of the bogus ten-dollar bill.

"Just this," he said presently. "A member of the ring would recognize this as one of the issue they believe Collins hijacked. I think they'd be sort of curious where I got it. Yes, the ringleaders would be mighty curious. You get the point?"

HARDY'S eyes widened, then narrowed in dubious disapproval.

"Too much of a risk, even for you, Blake," he said bluntly. "You'd probably get your throat slit on the spot."

"I disagree, Chief." The undercover ace shook his head. "This ten bucks is going to lead me places. And when I get there--"

Blake stopped short, leaned over the desk. For several minutes he talked in a low tone. Then he dropped back in his chair and stared fixedly at his chief. Hardy did tricks with facial expressions for a moment, then shrugged.

"You're walking to your own death," he said, "but I know damn well that any orders I might give you would be disregarded. You always did do things your way--and got results, too. All right, I'll do my part, and-- Dammit, good luck, Blake!"

Shortly after noon the following day, Tip Blake entered the Black Bear Café, and walked to the bar at the rear. He was all spruced up in new clothes; clothes that indicated to the casual observer he had not "gone up one flight" to save money. In fact, his whole bearing was that of a man who knew his way about town, and had the money to pay the fare.

The barkeep gave him a casual nod, then a closer scrutiny, and took his Martini order. Blake sipped it a moment, then grinned as he caught the bartender's eye and nodded him over.

"Tell me," he said, "everything's a bit hazy, but I think I remember your face. Was I in here last night? I must have looked like a bum."

The barkeep started to shake his head, suddenly stopped. His eyes widened in amazement.

"Hell, yes!" he exclaimed. "That shave you got since almost fooled me. Yeah, you were in here-- crooked to the gills. I had to toss you out. You wanted to play rough with the customers. Yeah, you were mean all right." He chuckled in remembrance.

Blake sucked in his breath and looked worried.

"My last bat, so help me!" he grated. Then, leaning over the edge of the bar, "Listen, what did I say while I was here?"

The bartender shrugged. "Nothing much," he said. "You bawled me out for not serving you when I was tending another customer. You fell over him, and then yipped about how no guy could do it to you. Well, he clipped you out of the way. That was your exit line."

"And I didn't say anything else?" Blake insisted. "You're sure? No names, or anything?"

"Nope. At least, I didn't hear you."

Blake sighed with relief, pulled the bogus ten-dollar bill from his pocket and tossed it on the bar.

"Mix another, and have something yourself," he said. "Thank heavens, you did toss me out!"

The bartender grinned automatically, mixed the drinks, then picked up the bill and went over to the cash register. As he did so, Blake glanced casually at the rows of colored bottles at the back of the bar, but his heart was

pounding like a triphammer against his ribs. Every move he was making was simply the playing of a hunch. If the bar-keep stuck the bill in the register and gave him change, his whole, plan would go up in smoke. It would mean that the Black Bear was just another ginmill that Saunders patronized, that the barkeep was just another fellow who knew him.

It was a part of Blake's hunch that there was a connection between the Black Bear Café and the counterfeit ring. When he had first started on the case, one or two trails had lead to the Black Bear. However, he did know that it was not the ring's headquarters, nor its secret print shop. Rather, he had guessed it to be one of the outlets through which the bogus stuff passed into general circulation. If so, the bartender would recognize the bill instantly.

SUDDENLY Blake's heart looped over, and there came a tingling sensation to the back of his neck. As the barkeep rang open the cash drawer, he automatically snapped the bill between his hands and glanced at it. Blake saw his big frame stiffen, his head bend closer to the bill. Then the man stuck the bill into his jacket pocket, fingered the correct change from the cash drawer, and came back to the bar. His face was as placid as a face such as he had could be, but there was a dull glitter in his eyes now. He picked up his drink, half grinned at Blake.

"Happy days, Mister," he said and downed it with a gulp.

Placing the glass on the bar he licked his lips contentedly, then suddenly snorted.

"Damn that kid!" he growled. "Where's that ice? Excuse me a minute, Mister."

Without waiting for Blake to do that, the barkeep went to a door at the end of the bar and disappeared through it. He was gone almost five minutes, during which the undercover ace sipped his drink and struggled to keep his pounding heart from going right through his ribs. When the bartender did

return, he was all smiles. He stopped in front of Blake, looked at his empty glass, then scooped it up in his big paw.

"Always like to return a favor, Mister," he grinned. "This one is on me."

When Blake eventually picked up the drink, it was all he could do to stop his hand from shaking. He knew full well that it contained knockout drops. But that was exactly as he had planned it. In a few minutes, he would be dead to the world. And when he woke up--if he woke up--he'd be in the ring's headquarters, in the presence of its ruthless leaders, who would ask him the questions he expected them to ask. Speculation, certainly. A hundred-to-one chance that his crazy plan would work out that way. And an even greater one that he'd see tomorrow's sun alive. However, since entering the service, Tip Blake had spent most of his time balancing his chances of life and death on a swaying tight-rope.

And so, without hesitating further, he put the glass to his lips and drank deeply.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dull, whirring sound finally penetrated Tip Blake's numbed brain and dragged him back to consciousness. His first impression was that an ax was embedded in the top of his skull. For a long moment blurred objects swam before his eyes. Then they cleared, and he saw faces--hard, cruel faces--with eyes that had not a flicker of mercy in their depths. He recognized the barkeep; Saunders was standing over by the far wall. But seated in a chair directly in front of the one in which he was slumped, was a tall, thin-faced, dark-eyed man in his late thirties. He was exceptionally well dressed, and there was an air about him that bespoke more of the European than the American.

As Blake blinked, the man raised a finger.

"Give him another shot," he said in a purring voice. "He'll be able to talk then."

The bartender lumbered forward, shoved a glass to Blake's lips. The liquid burned down the special agent's throat and made him gag.

But when he had finished his coughing spell, his head began to clear with startling rapidity. It was then that he placed the whirring sound he had first heard. It came from the floor above. And he started inwardly as the thought flashed through his brain--a printing press.

"And now you'll tell us where you got this!"

As the dark-eyed man spoke, he held up the bogus ten-dollar bill. Blake gaped at it, conscious that the man held a slip of white paper in his other hand.

"How do I know?" he grunted. "Who says its mine?"

"You paid for drinks with this at the Black Bear Café," the dark-eyed man said softly.

BLAKE swallowed hard, then forced a shaky laugh to his lips.

"So what?" he grunted, and shrugged. "Somebody must have passed it off on me."

The other shook his head. "No," he said, and tapped the bill. "This is Scar Brophy's idea of a joke. But the laugh is going to be on you--unless you talk. Why did he send you down to the Black Bear last night, and then again today, to try and stick us with this phony? What's he got in the wind?"

Blake blinked, looked stupid. "Who's Scar Brophy?" he asked.

The other's face darkened. As though by magic a gun appeared in his hand. Quick as a flash he snaked it out and dragged the muzzle down the side of Blake's face. The undercover agent groaned from the pain.

"Don't try to be funny!" the other clipped and held up the slip of paper. "I suppose you don't know anything about this, either?"

"No," Blake grunted. "What's it all about?"

"That's what you're going to tell us," the dark-eyed man replied. "We found it on you. It's a note that says, 'Call B at Proctor Two Seven-Nine-Six-Six for next instructions.' All right, you, that means Brophy, of course. He got his warning to keep his fingers out of our pie, so now we'll play rough. Start talking!"

Blake licked his lips, forced a faint glaze of fear into his eyes as he riveted them on the paper in the other's hand. Then suddenly he shook his head.

"I'm not saying a thing," he said, tight-lipped. "I'm no stool; and besides, Brophy would cut me up."

"Maybe we will, too," the dark-eyed man purred, and dragged the gun down Blake's face again as the special agent winced. "You know what happened to that other lad Brophy tried to jimmy into my bunch? Well, that was nothing, nothing at all! You're of no importance to me, that's why I'm giving you this much of a break. It's what Brophy's up to, I want to know. Well?"

Blake made himself tremble, and at the same time his eyes swept about the room. There was only one door, and Saunders and the hard-faced barkeep were standing in front of it. His heart sank, but he steeled himself inwardly. He'd worked out his plan, fully realizing that his chances wouldn't even be worth consideration. It was too late to try and back out now. He had to see it through as it was.

"I don't know a thing, I tell you," he whined. "Why should Scar tell me? He didn't send me down there last night. I was out on a bat and went in by mistake. But he did send me down today, and gave me the phony bill. When I'd passed it, I was to call him at that number. That's all I know, honest to God!"

The dark-eyed man regarded him with cobralike speculation, and Blake set himself to dodge the next blow from the gun. One small item was in his

favor. They hadn't tied him up, undoubtedly thinking that the three of them could take care of him. For a moment or two Blake sat on pins and needles, then the dark-eyed man slowly let air escape through his teeth.

"Yes," he murmured, "why should Brophy tell you his plans? Okay, we can always make you talk, Saunders, hand me that phone."

The stocky man picked up the French phone from a nearby table and handed it over. His eyes not leaving Blake's face for an instant, the man called the Proctor number. There was a slight clicking sound, then Blake heard the gruff, muffled voice at the other end.

"Yeah? Hello?"

"Put Brophy on," the dark-eyed man said.

"What's that?" came the muffled voice. "I can't hear you!"

The dark-eyed man repeated the request, and there was some mumbling that Blake couldn't hear distinctly. He knew, though, when the counterfeit leader handed him the phone.

"They're getting Brophy," the man whispered. "Take it and do your stuff. Hold that receiver so I can hear. And--feel this?"

The gun-barrel was jammed hard against Blake's ribs. He swallowed hard again, put the receiver to his ear. One, two minutes passed. Beads of perspiration began to form on his brow. He looked helplessly at the dark-eyed man, held his mouth close to the transmitter.

"Hello, hello!" he called. "Put Brophy on."

There was nothing but silence at the other end of the wire. Another minute passed, and then the dark-eyed man cursed and jerked the phone from Blake's hands.

"They're wise, or the connection's broken!" he snapped, and hung up. "So we'll wait a bit and try it again. Next time, you do the calling."

Blake shrugged his acquiescence, to cover up the triphammer beats of his heart against his ribs. In another couple of minutes he would be fighting for his life--a fight he sincerely believed would be utterly futile. Yet, being the type of man he was he did not give up hope entirely. If his number was up, he'd do a bit of damage himself before the killers, watching him like cats, rubbed him out.

And so, with that grim determination of purpose burned into his brain, he relaxed slowly and listened to the throbbing whir of the printing press on the floor above.

To Tip Blake, it seemed like five years, but in reality it was only five minutes before the dark-eyed man shoved the phone into his hands and nodded.

"All right," he grated, "put through that call again, and--take it easy. Don't forget what I did to that other lad Brophy sent!"

The undercover agent took the phone, lifted the receiver from its cradle, put his lips to the transmitter. As though his movement were a signal, there was suddenly a loud crashing sound from the floor below, followed almost instantly by the yammering chatter of gunfire!

In a flash Blake swung the phone, putting every ounce of his one hundred and eighty-five pounds behind it. The instrument caught the dark-eyed man squarely in the face, spilled him over backward in the chair. In what was really a continuation of the same movement, Blake hurled himself forward, dropped the phone and grabbed wildly for the other's gun hand. He got it between fingers of steel, wrenched savagely. The man hollered with pain, and the gun slipped from his fingers. But before Blake could scoop it up, it went skidding across the floor.

"IT'S a trap! Kill the rat! Kill him, damn you, Saunders!"

The words poured from the dark-eyed man's lips as he twisted back and tried to claw Blake down on top of him. At that instant a gun roared in front of Blake's face, and a spear of white fire cut through his side. As he twisted over, he saw Saunders' face glaring at him from behind the sights of a gun. In that instant, he expected to feel the stinging burn of a slug digging deep into his heart. But regardless of what his brain thought, every muscle of his taut body was functioning instinctively. And so it was that he hurled himself across the room just as Saunders' gun spat flame and sound.

Lunging to his feet, Blake braced himself for a split second, then dived for the gun on the floor. While still in mid-air he crashed into the barkeep, who had dived with the same idea in mind. Like two tons of brick, they crashed to the floor. The bartender swung his fist, and a jolt of lightning shot through Blake's head. Half groggy, he had just enough sense to twist over and escape the second blow. Then, bending his knees, he jammed his feet under the squirming bar-keep on top of him, then shot them upward with every ounce of his strength.

LIKE a shell from a gun, the bartender flew through the air and crashed into the dark-eyed man, leaping forward. Amid howls and snarling curses, they tangled legs and arms and crashed down. Blake didn't wait to see them hit. Through a red blur, he saw Saunders trying to circle about a table, trying to bring his gun to bear on him. Forcing strength into his aching body, the undercover agent lunged forward the last two feet, clawed up the dark-eyed man's gun, rolled over. The instant he hit the far wall he pivoted, snapped up the gun and fired three quick shots at the blurred figure of Saunders. At that same instant he heard the roar of the other's gun, and a sledgehammer of flame smashed his left shoulder against the wall.

Blake hardly felt the pain though. He was momentarily fascinated by the blank, stupid look that came into Saunders' face, by the tiny blue hole in his forehead, already beginning to drip blood, by the weird way the man's entire body seemed to fold up like an accordion and slump in a heap to the floor.

Tearing his eyes from the crumpled Saunders, Blake tried to swing the gun around toward where the dark-eyed man and the barkeep were scrambling to their feet. Yet it was all he could do to lift the barrel of the gun, much less swing it around. In that moment he caught the glitter of the knife in the counterfeit leader's hand, saw the murderous glint in his blazing eyes. With every ounce of strength he had left, Blake tried to swing the gun, but his entire arm seemed paralyzed. There wasn't a bit of feeling in it, from his fingertips to the shoulder socket. Cursing weakly he steeled himself for the blow of the knife streaking down toward him.

In the next instant, however, a bit of magic took place. There was the crash of splintering wood, the bark of a gun. Blood spurted from the dark-eyed man's hand, and invisible fingers seemed to pluck at the knife and send it spinning across the room. The man screamed with pain, tripped, and stumbled to his knees. Before he even hit, Chief Hardy, F.B.I. Agent Williams and two other grim-faced men had him pinned fast, while two other agents clamped handcuffs on the cringing barkeep and slapped him back against the wall.

Sucking breath into his aching lungs, Blake forced himself to his feet, and leaned wearily against the wall for support.

But he grinned happily as he met Hardy's eyes.

"Thanks," he mumbled. "It was getting too damn close. The print shop is upstairs."

"We've been there," the undercover squad chief nodded. "Got the plates and enough stuff to send this bunch up for life."

Blake nodded at the dark eyed man on the floor, who was staring at him with both hate and complete dumbfoundedness.

"He's going to the chair," Blake said. "He admitted knifing Collins. This other rat will bear me out to save his own rotten hide. Or maybe the two of them--"

"I didn't do it!" the barkeep screamed from the other side of the room. "It was him! It was him, Scaroni. That's the truth, so help me! You can't pin no killing on me!"

Blake shrugged. "There you are, Chief," he said. Scaroni eyed him malevolently.

"A snooping Government man, eh? So it wasn't Brophy! Should have known he didn't have the guts to do it."

Blake stared flint-eyed at the man on the floor.

"It's too late now, Scaroni," he said.

The other laughed suddenly, a hollow, bitter laugh.

"I've still got good lawyers," he said with a show at boasting. "You haven't burned me yet. But--there's an angle I don't get. How'd these guys get here? Followed you and Saunders, eh, when he brought you here?"

Blake shook his head. "No," he said. "You told them where I was."

The other's eyes widened, and his jaw dropped.

"I did?" he gulped. "How the hell d'you--"

"That phone call," Blake interrupted him. "You fell for that fake note you found on me. That was the one thing that counted most. You didn't call Brophy's number, Scaroni. You called a private number at our headquarters. And while you waited, half a dozen Government men traced the call--and then came here. Yeah, came here just in time, if you ask me!"

## The Love That Kills By Norvell W. Page



"No—no, Dave!" cried  
Esther frantically.

*His new insurance policy; their quarrels; the burning suspicion that his wife was unfaithful-- did those facts pin the guilt of that killer gun on his wife--the woman he loved above all else?*

THE telephone bell pulled me out of deep sleep and I cursed and groped for

the damned thing on the table beside the bed, I couldn't find it, so I swung my feet to the floor and pushed open my eyes. I found the phone then and took up the receiver....

The explosion of the gun almost blew me out of bed. I sprang halfway across the room, carrying the phone with me. The wires snapped, of course. There wasn't a soul in the room with me and the gun that had gone off was my own, the one I always shoved under my pillow at night. It was wedged in under the cross-bar of the headboard, and... I began to tremble. The shaking crept up my legs and into my spine. I tried to make the receiver connect with the hook and they rattled. For a moment, I thought it was the sound of my knees knocking. Heat flushed over me.

I cursed and threw the telephone at the door. I took a long pull from a bottle I kept in the bureau drawer, then leaned my hips against the bureau and looked at the revolver on the bed. The bullet had burned through the pillow where my head had been. Some of the linen had charred.... I laughed. It sounded crazy as hell.

It must have been a half hour before the shakes went out of my legs. I kept pulling at the bottle. Nobody came, of course. The house we live in--we being the wife and I--is a little bungalow that sets off at least thirty or forty feet from its neighbor. It was broad daylight. I was a night worker on the Beaufort Press and the wife--I began to wonder where Esther was.... I opened the bedroom door with slow caution, peeping around it--then I remembered. Esther had a date at a beauty shop at nine thirty. I looked at the Seth Thomas clock on the mantel piece. It was twenty after ten....

I almost had to force myself to turn back to the bedroom. I caught hold of the revolver, laughing a little bit, and pulled it loose from where it had wedged under the crossbar. It was stuck there pretty tight. I sat down and looked at it and my hand was trembling. How in hell had the thing got cocked? What had pulled the trigger? I pried my eyes away from the gun and looked at the telephone lying on the floor--and a prickling cold crept up my arms and legs. By God, it couldn't very well be an accident, could it? And that meant... that meant... *murder!*

The mere thought of the word jerked me off the bed. I took another pull at the bottle and picked up the telephone. I stood there looking at the broken wires and something gnawed at the back of my mind. I couldn't think what it was I was trying to remember, but it was something connected with the snapped cord....

Hell, nobody would want to murder me! I laughed a little at nothing at all, then began to fumble into a robe. I didn't shave or comb my hair--and I didn't have sense enough to leave the whisky alone. I took it with me into the living room and flopped into the big easy chair in front of the radio. I sat doing nothing but lifting the bottle every now and then. The clock ticked, ticked....

I DON'T know how much later it was that a knock at the front door pulled me to my feet, a funny knock, two little ones, a big one, and two more little. I frowned. That was Lily, blonde Lily Snyder from next door. It was dumb as hell of her, coming to the front door like that. She looked at me with her blue eyes, that hadn't been innocent for many a year, pulled wide open.

"What--what have you got that gun in your hand for?" she wanted to know.

I looked down at the gun, as surprised as she was to find it there, and put it in my robe pocket. "Superstition of mine," I told her. "Always go to the door with a gun in your hand, like knocking on wood."

I stepped aside for her to come in, but she didn't. She shook her head, her fuzzy hair fanning out behind pink cheeks. She was still breathless. Pretty? Sure, but she was a wise number, plenty hard and not too young any more. She didn't compare with my Esther even if I had given her a little tumble. Esther had been giving me hell lately and I hadn't thought it would make any difference to Snyder. He and Lily were separating anyway....

"Esther called up," Lily said. "She's been trying to get you and can't. Says she left the hot water heater going and she's afraid it will blow up."

Lily smiled at me. "Esther went out awful early today, didn't she?"

"Uh-huh," I agreed, "Aren't you coming in?"

She shook her head. She looked at me, as if she wanted to come in, but she started off the porch. She said, loud enough for the neighbors to hear her if they were listening, as they probably were, "I've got to run back and tell Esther that you're all right."

I closed the door and stood there in the hall trying to remember what it was I had to do. I remembered the hot water boiler and went and cut off the gas, but that still didn't seem to be everything that was on my mind. I went back and turned on the radio and a man was saying: "This delightful medication will be sent to you absolutely free. Just write care of the station to which you have been listening, or telephone...."

I came to my feet with a shout that I barely choked back. "I've got to tell Esther that you're all right," Lily had said. It had been Esther who had telephoned earlier.... I remembered blindingly now what had gnawed at the back of my brain when I was looking at the broken telephone wire and now I had the answer to how the revolver had been cocked....

*Esther had tried to murder me!*

THE thought was there in my brain, but somehow it didn't register. I repeated the words to myself, aloud. "Esther tried to murder me." I went over the reasons for thinking that, and recalled that just the other night when Lily and her husband had been over here we had been listening to a detective story skit on the air. In it, one man had killed another by fastening the wire of a telephone receiver to the trigger of a gun so that when the man lifted the receiver, he would shoot himself....

I had turned, half-joking, half-serious as you will when you've had a few drinks and marital grievances are near the surface. "When you get ready to murder me, Esther, that way's as good as any other," I had said.

Esther had looked at me, deadly calm. The last three or four months had been pretty much full of hell for both of us, raving and fighting most of the time.

"I'll bear it in mind, Dave," she had said.

And now.... And now.... Realization hit me like lightning.

I switched off the radio. It seemed to interfere with something inside my head. The clock was still striking and I looked at the hands pointing to twelve. That meant it was thirteen minutes of, I thought dully. It was always fast. It stopped striking and I dropped my forehead on my arms. It was silly of a hard-boiled newspaper man. I cried.

It didn't last long, a half dozen sobs that I couldn't hold down, then I lifted my head. It's foolish to drink so much before breakfast....

Yet it was all diamond clear now. Despite our recent quarrels, Esther still waited up until I came home from the job. We'd been particularly late last night, the Snyders having been over, too. What had happened this morning was this: Esther, with the excuse of the beauty shop date, had got up much earlier than usual, put the gun where it would blow my brains out when I groped, half-asleep, for the telephone and lifted the receiver.... It wasn't our quarrels. They were the result, rather than the cause. Esther had been restless for the last year and recently, well, it was pretty bad, both of us screaming at each other, making wild threats. Once, I'd called home and Esther had been slow to answer and I had thought I heard a man's voice at the other end, in our bedroom....

I was cold sober now. I'm pretty sure I was. I went to the kitchen and sat at the table, drinking cup after cup of coffee and staring straight ahead. I didn't see a thing. This murder plan, I saw, had one overwhelming advantage. It gave Esther a complete alibi. She downtown in a beauty shop, Lily coming over and finding me dead. An abrupt question presented itself. Had that been deliberate? Did Esther know the pass I had made at Lily after that telephone call and the man's voice I was now sure I had heard? It would have been a nice, womanly gesture, sending Lily to make the discovery....

But surely, Esther wasn't jealous, not the way she had been acting up recently? What was the motive? My lips felt stiff when they grinned. Plenty of motive. I had taken out a fifteen thousand dollar insurance policy, with a double indemnity clause that would become operative in case of... *accident!* If I were dead now, Esther would have money--and another man!

I PUSHED a laugh out between my lips, moving the dirty dishes to the sink. My cup smashed on the floor and I hurled the rest of the dishes after it, slammed the milk bottle against the wall.

"Damn you! Damn you!" I shouted.

And suddenly I couldn't stay in the house. I threw on my pants, grabbed my coat and hat and stumbled to the street. After that I walked. I had the revolver in my hip pocket. There was a madness in my brain that kept little spots of red exploding before my eyes. I reached the corner where I used to wait for the street car and a trolley came along and I didn't get on it. I just stood staring at nothing. I turned slowly and went back home.

A man's heart can't keep beating at fever heat for very long. Rage can't burn and burn in the brain without new fuel. So I became calmer after while. Abruptly, I knew that I must not betray myself like that. No, no there must be a better way. I laughed as I went to the drug store to call the telephone company. I had, suddenly, a swell plan. I'd fix everything the way Esther had left it, the gun all set and ready to go off when anybody answered the telephone. I'd make her suffer a bit before she confessed and I killed her!

I had no doubt that Esther would come home. When Lily Snyder went back to her house she had told Esther that I was drunk, but alive. So Esther would know that her trap had failed and she would have to come home and try again....

Well, it wasn't anything like I'd thought it would be, her coming home. She just walked in and smiled at me in the absent way she had sometimes.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dave, getting drunk in the daytime, alone like that." She laid a hand on my shoulder as she went by to put her hat in the closet. "You ought to have waited until I got here."

Where was my practiced laughter now? My head sagged. I told myself *this is the woman who tried to murder you for another man, to collect your insurance*. But they were just words that didn't mean anything. All because she had put her hand on my shoulder in an old, familiar gesture.

"I was extravagant and got a steak for supper," Esther called, her voice fading toward the kitchen. "How'd you like some French fried?"

"Sure, swell," I croaked. I thought, *she's being nice to me to cover up on that other thing. She's trying to disarm me so that the next time she springs the trap....* I wondered why I had never doubted Esther's fidelity. I tried saying to myself now that Esther had been unfaithful to me and it made me physically sick. I got up violently and, waiting for supper, I kept walking up and down, looking blindly at books on the shelves, fiddling with the Seth Thomas and being careful to set it back just thirteen minutes. That clock was the first thing we had bought for our home after we were married.... Would it be poison she tried next? I wondered. A wild courage came to me. I had imagined what had happened this morning. Esther hadn't tried to kill me. *For God's sake, Esther, hurry! Kill me and get it over with!* If only death would be quick so that I wouldn't have time to realize....

I COULD hear Esther moving around in the kitchen, clanging a pan, clanking dishes. She came and leaned in the doorway, a cooking fork in her hand. I hadn't looked at her before. She'd got the works at the beauty shop, hair washed and curled and high-lighted with henna, nails, eyebrows. Something clicked inside my brain, something that sent me back four years to the night when Esther had first donned a red apron like that--to cook for me. Her hair had been crisp and close against her round, little head like this and her red lips had smiled at me in that self-same way, half mocking, half-inviting, as if we were lovers instead of husband and wife.

I went toward Esther with my hands groping for her. I put my fingers on her white, slim throat and shook her a little. She kept that smile on her lips. I ...  
Damn it, *I kissed her!*

"For God's sake, Esther," I said, and my voice was hoarse in my own ears, "if you wanted to get rid of me..."

Her hands were pressing on my shoulder blades. She scratched my neck with the tines of the cooking fork. Foolishly, I thought that we were letting the steak burn. I could smell it.... We couldn't afford to burn up a steak. Not at fifty-nine cents....

"What the hell are you talking about?" Esther demanded.

And I couldn't tell her. I hedged, muttered something about the way we'd been fussing lately. Esther said, "Wait a minute." She went and lifted the steak off the stove, then she came back.

"I've been thinking a lot today, Dave," she said. "I'm not going to go on like this and we'd better have it out. Dave--" She set her hands on my shoulders. "Dave, I've been stepping out on you, but..." She went on so fast her words blurred. "Not what you think."

I dragged a hand across the back of my neck where it felt tired. "I'm not thinking anything," I muttered.

"This man has a lot of money--"

Then what did they want with my insurance, I wondered.

"--and he said he could show me a good time. I used to know him before... before I ever met you. I was lonely, Dave, terribly lonely at nights. I told you I was, warned you.... And finally, I went out with him. We were arguing about going one night when you called...."

Esther's eyes were wide open, looking directly at mine, the irises shifting from side to side, looking first into one of my eyes, then the other. It sounds silly, but that's the way you do when somebody is so close. I didn't want to

look at her. I was thinking about the fellows in the office and how they laughed about infidelity. Going home unexpectedly, they'd say, "I'm going to knock at the front door, then run around back and beat hell out of the son of a she-dog when he sneaks out..."

I said, "I guess it's been lonely all right."

"Oh, it was, Dave, it was." Esther had hold of my coat lapels and I looked down at her hands, the finger nails pink and shining. Esther didn't hold with that business of making them look like they'd been dipped in blood. "Dave, you believe me, don't you. It wasn't anything... bad."

I muttered, "Sure." I felt dead inside. Esther, who was so bright and shining, so different from those wives of other men who couldn't be trusted. Esther... I stumbled away from her, heard her feet, close and quick, behind me. I went into the bedroom and tried to close the door, but she blocked that. I whipped about.

"Get the hell out of here!" I yelled at her. "You and your rich boy friend! Leave me alone, for God's sake! I'll get out. I'll let you go free. You knew I would. You didn't have to try to kill me to do it!"

I FLUNG out an angry hand toward the bed. I'd made it up, neat as ever, hid the bullet-burned pillow, but I had the gun wedged where it had been before and the repaired telephone cord looped over the trigger. She looked where I pointed and suddenly I was cold and filled with hate. I watched her sharply, my fingers clenched against my thighs, my shoulders hunched a little. I realized that I was going to kill her. Not the way I had planned. I couldn't let the gun do the work that my fingers ached for. Esther looked at the bed, frowning. She turned toward me.

"I don't understand, Dave," she said gently. She saw my face and her breath sucked in. I could hear it hiss between her red lips, between her white teeth. "*Dave!*" she whispered.

I guess I looked pretty ugly. I felt that way. I reached out for her throat again, but not the way I had before. There was purpose now. I was going to squeeze that white throat until it popped. And Esther? She didn't look scared any more. She stared me in the eye and walked in between my hands, between my arms. I... I didn't touch her throat.

"What's the matter, boy?" she asked.

Her hands went to my chest in that old gesture I loved. Her eyes... I... I told her then, told her all about the gun trap that had been set for me. She clung to me, trembling, a whimpering cry on her lips.

"No, no, Dave," she cried. *"No!"*

It didn't make sense, but she was frightened, not of me, but of the thing that had almost happened. I gripped her wrists and stared over her head and a curse came from way down inside of me. I went over and got the gun and put it in my pocket.

"Where are you going, Dave? What are you going to do?" Esther was frantic. She clung to me. "Dave!"

I patted her shoulder, grinning despite the rage that was inside of me. I was happy, happy.

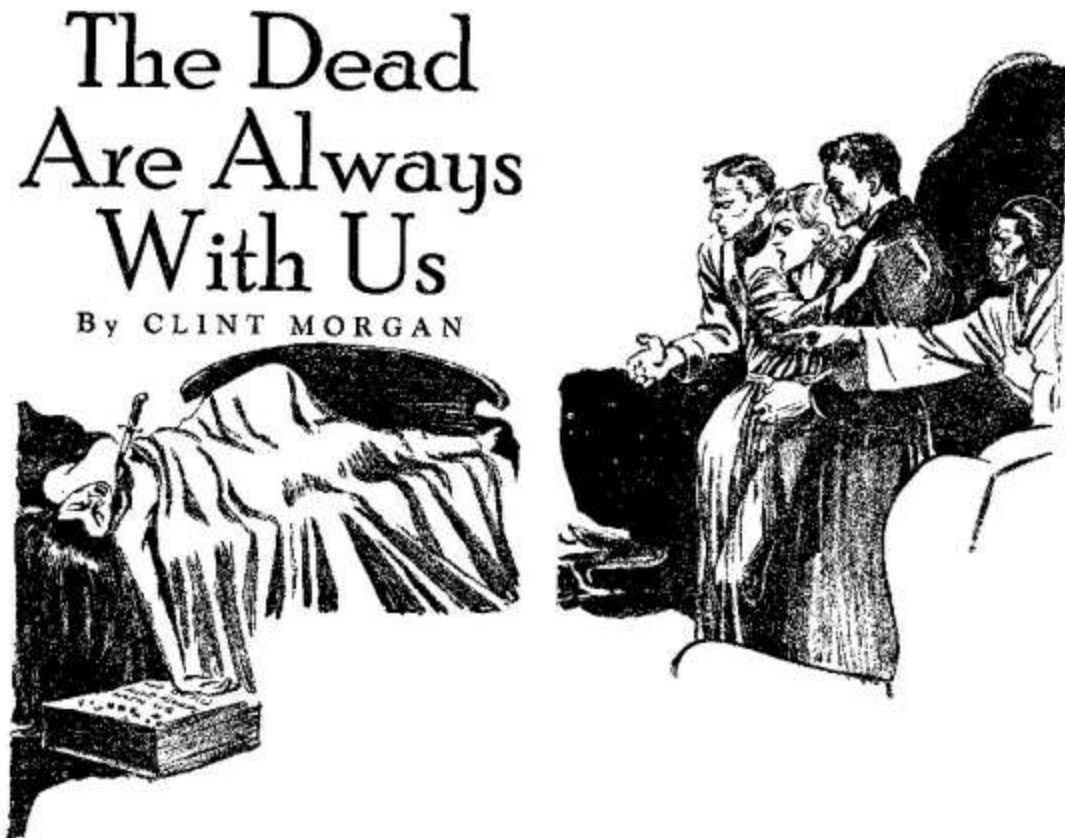
"It's all right, darling," I told her. "I'm just going to put the fear of God into somebody. You can have the bullets out of the gun, if you want. I... I've got to confess, too. When you turned sour on me, I stepped out a little, too. When she tried to go serious on me, I told her it was you and me 'till death did something about it. I wouldn't marry her on a bet...."

I left Esther like that. Queer, isn't it, what fright will do to you? I'd clean forgotten all this time that Esther usually slept late alongside me, and that, except for this appointment at the beauty shop, Esther, and not I, would have answered the telephone this morning, her head would have been on the pillow that the bullet went through.

By God, I'd have to be careful when I gave Lily Snyder hell, careful only to scare hell out of her and not hurt her. Lily Snyder who had set that death trap for Esther here in the house she had visited last night, trying to make death do something about me and Esther....

## The Dead Are Always With Us By Clint Morgan

(ps Edwin Truett Long)



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*A prodigal son returns and murder strikes the same night. There are fingerprints galore--all made by a dead man! What is the secret of the mystic sentence on the teak-wood box?*

FANG, the huge police dog, rumbled a low warning in his throat. Great eyes tried valiantly to pierce the blackness. Fang knew an intruder was on the grounds. He crouched low and slunk forward in the direction of the soft

footsteps, and making out a bulking, black shadow on the gravel leading to the front steps, he struck.

"Down! Down!" The voice was a low, tense whisper as a man leaped quickly aside to let the big beast hurtle past. Fang lit on the soft gravel, turned making hoarse little noises of uncertainty in his throat. He growled again, sniffed impatiently, tensed for another leap.

Then out of the blackness something hard and cruel crashed against the dog's big skull, smashed him from his feet to the gravel, where he lay breathlessly panting, moaning a little. Again and again the heavy bar crashed down, until the skull splintered and crackled like an eggshell beneath a heel.

FOR a long time the intruder leaned over the dead dog. Eventually he dragged the heavy body into the bushes, and tiptoed back down the drive toward the looming Fargo Mansion. He entered at the side, through French doors, by means of a key.

DR. VINCENT Benson was in love. For the first time during his short but successful career he felt that he had time to devote to the lighter things. Consequently, on the second floor of the Fargo house he flipped on a single lamp and surveyed himself in the mirror. He was a little man, grey at the temples, with a weak mouth and chin. The reflection must have pleased him, for he smirked at the glass, touched his already smooth hair with military brushes, adjusted a gaudy dressing robe over violent pajamas and turned out the light.

Out into the hall, tiptoeing quietly, instinctively feeling for squeaky boards, the doctor stole through the blackness.

Twice he paused to listen at doors, and apparently satisfied, went on his way. At the third door he paused to listen again. All was black. There was no line of light beneath the door. The doctor smirked, tapped a tiny tattoo on the panel. No answer. Perhaps she was asleep. The doctor smirked again, turned the knob of Ann Fargo's room and found the door unlocked.

The faint light through the window showed the silhouetted outline of Ann's full figure. For a moment he stood over her grinning down fatuously. No slip of a girl this, but a fully matured woman, from flaring hips to bold, fully developed breasts. He touched her bare shoulder.

"Sweetheart," he half giggled. She moaned a little and turned away. He stood irresolutely for a moment, then his arm went beneath her shoulders, his thin lips pressed downward on hers, crushed her generous breasts to his thin chest.

Instead of awakening to rapture, she moaned again, stirred beneath his kiss. At the same time the doctor became aware of something sticky and unpleasant on his chest where his robe had gaped open. He touched it vaguely, looked down at his *inamorata* with eyes that widened. Suddenly he leaped back, teeth chattering, switched on the light.

The front of Ann Fargo's gown was in tatters. The front of her body, the slopes of her ample breast, the flat waist, all were crimson and viscous with thick blood.

Dr. Benson's first impulse was to call for help. But how would he explain the discovery? What would the rest of the family think about his presence in a bathrobe. He trotted to the connecting bathroom, came back to sponge the blood from the woman. She stirred beneath his touch, moaned again, but kept her eyes tightly closed, her lips twisting in pain. Another few moments and the little doctor's teeth chattered worse than ever. He started back in disbelief. *There was no wound!*

Hemorrhage? There was no blood on her lips. Yet the body showed no cut, no bullet wound. Then whence the blood?

NOW Ann Fargo was a true daughter of the Black Fargos with black passions and blacker temper. Shrewdly Benson decided to wait. Perhaps as a sleepwalker she had gotten herself into trouble. Then it was up to him, her fiance, to shield her! He tried hard for the next ten minutes to break her lethargy, but without success. Presently he rolled her aside, changed the sheet with its drops of blood, changed the gown, and rolled them into a bundle.

He didn't know what she had done, but whatever it was he meant to protect her. After all, the woman was an heiress, and the doctor had worked too hard all his life to let this opportunity slip away. He listened for the last time to her still, even breathing and departed, the bloodstained sheets and the telltale gown beneath his skinny arm.

Cautiously he peered ahead through the blackness. A tiny rim of light showed beneath the door of one of the rooms. Softly, softly the doctor went toward it. Almost at the same instant he was opposite it flew open with a crash.

"Help, help!" screamed a thin voice, and Raga, the Eurasian house servant leaped from the lighted doorway and crashed into the passing doctor. The impact knocked Benson across the hall. He brought up with a crash against an overstuffed chair. Some instinct caused him to thrust his bundle beneath the low chair before crawling to his feet. He seized the chattering servant by the shoulders, tried to calm him.

"What is it? What is it?" Neale Fargo, the elder brother, followed by his wife, now in the doorway of the adjoining room.

Still chattering breathlessly Raga pointed over his shoulder.

Nearly fifteen years ago Black John Fargo had brought a second wife home from the Orient. A Eurasian, of mixed bloods, her daintiness had been in odd contrast to the bluff, roaring head of the Fargo clan, who thrived on

violence. She was short and slender, but her breasts were mounds of loveliness, her lyre-like hips smooth and well-turned.

Black John's children had hated their new mother from the start, hated her for that very perfection. And after Black John met his death in a drunken brawl, the children hated this strange quiet woman even more, for he left his fortune irrevocably to her. She had been lenient with them in spite of their marked dislike; they had only to ask and she fulfilled their wishes. But the thought of having to ask rankled in them all. They were the Fargos, she an outsider.

Now Neale Fargo and his wife stood in the doorway of Abga Fargo's room and knew they need hate no longer. After her husband's death she had wasted away, fading fast as all Oriental women do. The slender body was scarcely discernible beneath the sheet. The eyes in the saffron face stared straight upward, glassy and distended. One hand, skinny and talon-like extended from the bed to the table, lay on a teak wood box, as if her dying moment had found her trying to open it. Between her withered breasts, the hilt of a dagger stood straight upright in the circle of lamplight. Even as the watchers looked the white coverlet seemed to grow slowly crimson.

Neale Fargo took a swift stride reached for the death weapon.

"Don't touch it. Don't touch anything! It's murder, Neale, murder!" His wife stood with wide eyes restraining hand extended toward him.

"But the box," he whispered, "Look at the box! She's written something."

Before his wife could prevent, he lifted the dead hand from the box, tossed it carelessly back to the bed where it fell with a thud beside the corpse.

THE box was like a single block of wood, a foot or so square, two inches thick. Across its polished surface a finger dipped in blood had scrawled the words, "*The dead are always with us!*"

Dr. Benson's mouth dropped open. Neale seemed unable to comprehend the thing. Helen's eyes were wide with horror and fear. Neale whirled to Raga, who crouched by the doorway.

"You killed her," he grated. "You stabbed her!"

"No, no, not Raga! I find her. I hear dog, go out, see nothing. After while hear noise in here! Find dead! Knife! Blood!"

Silence.

Each one in the room looked suspiciously at another. Benson dreaded the moment when Ann's condition would have to be explained.

"What were you doing?" grated Neale again, this time to the doctor.

"Why, I--I--I heard Raga scream and--"

He paused. Raga's eyes were black and questioning. Benson took a bold step.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

Neale's face blackened. He started to reply, then froze into listening silence.

From below came a strident beat at the front door, the clatter of the big brass knocker against its plate. Raga turned and pattered down the stairs. Wordlessly the three awaited.

Feet on the stairway, booming, heavy feet.

"Well, quite a gathering! Aren't you glad to see your brother? The prodigal son is home!"

"Bart Fargo!"

It was Helen, Neale's wife who spoke. Impulsively she stepped toward him, her eyes alight. Every line of her curved body was outlined through the gossamer gown. Its ribboned, low-cut neck revealed milky upper slopes of

arrogant breasts. Bart Fargo, the seafarer, put his arm about her shoulders and leered at his brother whose face blackened.

"Well, somebody in the family's glad to see me! But by God, Neale, after leaving you alone for three years it looks like you'd grin a little at least! What the--"

SLOWLY he thrust the woman away from him, took a single stride toward the reddened bed. His eyes were round and startled as he looked down at the dead woman, at the wasted frame, the sunken cheeks, the terribly glazed eyes. Then he laughed looked directly at his brother.

"By God, so you killed the old witch at last! I didn't think you had the guts!"

There was a long, strained silence. Then Neale's voice arose in vehement denial.

Bart stood silent, listening, his eyes going from the nearly nude wife to the angry husband, and back again. Eventually he shrugged.

"Well," he spoke slowly, "it's a mess, but after all, what's the difference? No need of lying, we all hated her. I don't blame you much."

"I wonder," this time it was Neale whose voice was accusing, "I wonder just what brought you home tonight of all nights?"

"If you're accusing me of this job it's no go, my good brother. From what I can see that box and dagger are both covered with fingerprints so the police won't have much trouble. As a matter of fact here's what brought me home. After all I'm a member of the family and when I read this clipping I got homesick! Has she run through all the old man's dough yet?"

He fumbled through a wallet, thrust out a clipping from a West Coast paper,

"Mrs. John Fargo," Neale read, "adds Corti necklace to her collection of gems. Price estimated at quarter of a million."

"It looks to me," said Bart slowly, "that she was trying to spend your money in order to keep you from having it. I don't blame you for killing her, I'd have done it myself in your shoes! A good lawyer will get you off--maybe!" His voice was a triumphant sneer.

"Damn it," roared Neale, "I say I didn't kill her! I--where are you going?" This last to Dr. Benson.

"I'm going to break the news to Ann," said the doctor and walked stiffly away. A few seconds later he called Raga, and the servant trotted down the hallway toward him.

Neale started from the room muttering about clothes. Bart called after him, "Better call the police and let 'em get started. If you didn't kill her you've got nothing to fear."

Neale whirled.

"Damn' right I'm going to call the police, but I'm going to talk to you first! Wait 'til I come back." The door closed behind him.

With the click of the latch Helen was in the younger brother's arms. Her body was vibrant, hot through the thin material of her gown as she pressed close, sliding her arms about his neck.

"I knew you'd come," she breathed, and sought his lips impatiently. For a moment Bart laughed down at her then swept her even closer. His hands tingled at the fevered softness of her skin; his mouth closed on hers.

Presently he drew away. "Now take it easy," he whispered, "and let no one know you wrote me. Particularly the police."

Her eyes grew wide. She glanced fearfully at the corpse and said hoarsely "Then it was you!"

"Hell, no!" he laughed. "I just got here--must have been Neale!"

"If you'll come downstairs," stiffly from the doorway, "I'd like to talk to you before the police get here. You, Helen, would look better for some more clothes."

"I doubt that," grinned Bart impudently, swaggering toward the door, his black eyes sweeping Helen's body.

FIVE minutes later in the library. "Well, what are we waiting for?"

"For Ann and the doctor."

As if in answer to the words Dr. Benson came into the room, followed by Helen, in negligee.

"Where's Ann?"

"Ann," announced the doctor, "took it very hard. I'm afraid she'll be confined to her bed."

"Then we'll go up there! She's in on this."

"I gave her a hypo," said the doctor quite calmly.

Neale poured a drink around and began to talk. Bart eyed the long expanse of Helen's sheer hosiery with grin of triumph. Neale noted this angrily, but his voice droned on. presently he stopped.

"So," Bart's voice was low, "the necklace isn't here. How do you know?"

"Because I've searched the house for it," snapped Neale. "She's been crazy I tell you, for the past month. It isn't in the bank because she showed it to me every day or so! Do you think I liked the idea of having a necklace worth that much lying around here loose? Of course I looked for it! There's only one place it could be that I didn't look. That teakwood box. No matter how often I've tried I've never been able to get into it. She always kept it right

under her nose. Now before calling the police I suggest that together we open that box."

"Oh no, my fine brother, not so fast! It's a good story but not good enough. That box is pretty well covered with fingerprints. We'll let the police take a look at it!"

SHERIFF TOLLIVER, fat and perspiring, arrived with three deputies. Blowing and puffing he heaved himself into the house, sank down on a divan while he directed his men to their work. In the same room with him he kept the doctor, Neale Fargo, Helen, his wife and Bart Fargo. He listened to their stories reflectively, called Raga in, and listened to his version of the murder.

"Mr. Bart," he grunted slowly, "I don't understand just how come you arrive at the moment you did?"

Bart laughed. "I've been away three years, sheriff. I stopped at the filling station just down the road and bought gasoline. I think the time of my being there and the time of my arrival here will alibi me. But just to be sure, I'm the only one of the group that wouldn't gain by my stepmother's death. We always hated each other. A few years she made a will that cut me off entirely. But my brother, Neale, and my sweet sister, Ann. Well--" He shrugged.

"I think we better see if we can't wake Miss Ann."

Dr. Benson nodded, left the room.

"Anyone of you could have done it," continued the sheriff, "but I got an idea the prints will tell. I'm going to fingerprint all of you."

Neale arose stiffly. "That'll be unnecessary, for the time being. Fingerprints were my dead father's favorite hobby."

He walked across the room, rummaged through the desk and returned with a square card index. "You'll find several prints of every one of us filed there!"

The sheriff called a deputy, whispered to him in a low tone. The deputy took the box and departed for the upper floor.

"Now,--" clearing his throat ponderously, "now we'll--" but Sheriff Tolliver got no further.

A running patter of feet on the stairs. Dr. Benson burst into the room wild-eyed, disheveled.

"Ann! Ann!" he gasped. "She's dead!"

They made for the stairs, the fat sheriff in the lead.

Ann was dead on her bed. Her face was contorted, her lips blue, her tongue protruding. The sheriff pulled down the covers, saw there was no blood, and pulled them slowly up over her face. He turned to the doctor.

"She fainted when I told her of her stepmother's murder," Benson faltered, "so I gave her a hypo. I returned several times and she was sleeping quietly but when I came up this time she was--this way!"

"You're a doctor, ain't you? What killed her?"

"From the congestion around her heart and her contorted facial muscles I'd say it was heart trouble. She's been bothered lately with a bad heart and I've often--"

"Bosh!" snorted Neale. "She was like an ox. Damned if I don't believe you did it yourself, and the old witch too! Sheriff, I--"

The sheriff turned impatiently to the laconic deputy who entered bearing the card index of Fargo fingerprints and the teakwood box. He sat them before the sheriff.

"I may be wrong," he smiled mildly, "but lookee here!"

The bloody words across the box gleamed black in the light. "The dead are always with us." Beneath the words, a perfect set of fingerprints, clear along the edge. The deputy continued.

"There's a set like these on that French door leading into the bedroom, and another on the old fashioned safe in the corner. Plain and clear, all of them. And the dagger handle bears the same print."

"Well, whose are they?" The sheriff was impatient. The deputy shrugged, pulled a filed card from the index box, and handed it to him. Everyone in the room tensed, glared suspiciously at one another.

"My God!" said the sheriff, "they sure seem to match perfectly, far as I can see!"

HE sat silent for so long that Bart reached over and took the card from his fat paw. Bart laughed suddenly.

"The murderer," he sneered, "left the fingerprints of our good father, Black John Fargo. There's only one thing wrong with that, sheriff. Black John has been dead eight years." His laughter filled the room.

Sheriff Tolliver sighed and reached for the phone.

Neale snickered and said, "The dead are always with us!"

"Lady," Tolliver told the operator, "this is Sheriff Jud Tolliver speaking. Look all over the county till you find Mike Jarnegan. And don't quit trying till you do. Send him to Fargo's place, out on the hill."

MIKE JARNEGAN almost ran into the city wagon that stood in the front drive. He got out lazily and watched two city employees pick up the body of a dead dog, stiff and stark.

"What you got, boys?" he grinned.

"You can see, can't you?" snapped the driver. "Poor critter musta got hit down on the highway and drug himself clear up here."

Jarnegan leaned forward curiously, ran his hand over four stiff legs. He looked closely at the battered head.

"Put him back where you found him," he said shortly.

"Like hell," grunted the driver, but Jarnegan flashed his badge. They dropped the carcass back into the bushes and departed grumbling.

Jarnegan's gaze encompassed the exterior of the house. A faint plume of smoke came from the main chimney. Hurriedly he entered, nodding at the deputy at the door.

"My God," groaned the sheriff, "where do you hide? The county pays you a good salary for special investigations and I do all your work!"

Jarnegan grinned and continued through the room. "Somebody get themselves killed?" he asked over his shoulder.

"And how!" groaned the sheriff, "where are you going?"

"Downstairs," said Jarnegan and found the door to the basement, the sheriff followed curiously as far as the top of the steps. From below came the sound of a startled voice, the clang of an iron door, and the sound of a scuffle. Puffing and snorting, the sheriff started down the stairs.

"Never mind," called Jarnegan. "I've got him."

"Who? Who you got?" The sheriff backed up to allow Jarnegan and his captive to emerge.

"Damn' if I know," said Jarnegan cheerfully, "but I noticed a little smoke from the chimney when I came in. This guy was burning some bloodstained; sheets and a nightgown."

"G's," said the sheriff. "It's the doctor! Well, bring him on in and let's see what he's got to say."

Dr. Benson's story didn't take long. Simply and frankly he told his tale of the previous night's occurrences, how he had gone to his fiancée, found her in a coma and in bloodstained garments. He contended his only reason for destroying the sheets and the bloody gown was to keep her, Ann, in the clear. "After all," he concluded, "she's dead now. She can't be punished further."

"Well," sighed the sheriff, "I guess that solves it. The dame went in and killed her stepmother and did the Dutch act. If she just hadn't 'a borrowed her dead father's fingerprints to do it with. Something gets screwier and screwier."

WHILE Jarnegan viewed the bodies, the sheriff told him the whole, affair, detail for detail, as he had gotten it. Jarnegan pulled the sheets back over the dead bodies, asked a question.

"Have you checked on the will?"

"Sure. It's just like the younger brother says. He gets nothing. Neale gets the property and most of the money. The dead woman, Ann, was willed a part. But the brother Bart was evidently the black sheep, for the old lady cut him off all together. Oh yeah, the servant, old Raga, got a small bequest. We've searched the whole dump and found nothing much in the way of clues. Nobody seems to have ever seen the dagger before. You want to talk to the gang?"

"Not now. I'll look around a bit first. You seem to have everything pretty well covered."

Jarnegan picked the teakwood box carefully from the table. He shook it but there was no answering rattle. The lid fitted tightly on all four sides,

seeming to come clear to the bottom of the box. He shook it again expecting the lid to fly up. Nothing happened.

"What's in this trick gadget?"

"Nothing. You can see it doesn't rattle. I couldn't open it and didn't want to break it until I get those prints verified. That's the spot where it was found."

Jarnegan turned it over and over cautiously. Suddenly he said, "Who's at the door?"

The sheriff waddled slowly toward the knock, his fat back turned. Swiftly Jarnegan thrust the box far back under the mattress out of sight. The corpse moved slightly.

He met the coroner at the door. "Listen," he told him, "I'm going down to my office. I want a fast autopsy on the girl down the hall with the exact location of every scratch and hypo mark on her body. Let me hear from you as soon as you finish."

In the lower hallway he picked up the charred bundle of bedclothes. "Tell the sheriff I'll get in touch with him in an hour or so," he told the deputy on guard, "and don't let anyone carry off that dead dog, no matter how badly it smells."

HIS old roadster roared off. Down the road he stopped and ate a hamburger, made a telephone call, and continued on into town. At the Daily News office he went upstairs, spoke to the city editor, and departed with a huge pile of clippings beneath his arm.

He went directly across the hallway from his own nondescript office and tossed the bloodstained bundle on a glass-topped desk. "Doc," he said, "I want you to look right after these stains for me, will you? A hurry job."

"Got something?"

"I'm going to get something," laughed Jarnegan and turned aside.

Two hours later the chemist knocked on his door, entered at his hail. He spoke briefly.

"Sure?" queried Jarnegan.

"Absolutely," said the chemist. "It isn't human blood at all. Might be a dog's, a cat's, or a calf's. Does that help you?"

"Yes and no," laughed Jarnegan and reached for his hat. He tossed the great stack of clippings concerning the doings of the Black Fargos into a drawer.

THEN minutes later he and the vice president of the First National descended into the safety deposit chamber. Much against his will, but influenced by Jarnegan's persuasive tongue and shiny badge, the banker opened a box. Together they checked through the contents. Carefully Jarnegan itemized every piece of jewelry. He left for a phone.

"Listen, sheriff, I'll talk and you grunt." He spoke on for some moments. "Don't worry," he concluded, "I'll be there with bells on."

"I got to tell you something," rasped the sheriff. "There ain't nobody listening. Somebody has lifted that teakwood box. I went to give it to the print man and the damn' thing was gone! It may not be important but it's got a lot of pretty fingerprints on it. We've still got the dagger but--"

"Listen," said Jarnegan softly, "don't worry about it. I know where it is and you be damn' sure you don't find it! Raise a lot of hell in front of the family but don't look for it too good. Now have you got everything I told you straight?"

"Yeah," said the sheriff, "but--"

Jarnegan hung up with a bang.

The coroner answered his own phone. "Yes," he said, "there was a hypo mark and we found a little morphine in the viscera. Not enough to kill her. Across her right hand, on the back, was a fresh scratch. Outside of that, nothing. From the contraction of muscles I'd say she actually died from shock. However we're still testing for poison."

DARKNESS, this time with a rising wind that blew blacker clouds across the sky. Rain was in the air. Jarnegan parked his car far down the road from the Fargo place and went forward on foot. Through the stunted cedars and the well clipped hedges he made his way. At the front of the house he saw a dark figure loitering, knew it was a deputy on guard. A skeleton key let him into the darkened library with no trouble. Cautiously he closed the door behind him, slipped the catch. There was silence through the big house, broken only by the slow ticking of the mantel clock. The slim finger of Jarnegan's flashlight showed that it read nine-fifteen. From somewhere out in the hallway he heard the drone of low voices.

Cautiously, a step at a time he made his way through the room. Almost at the doorway he paused, dove suddenly but silently behind a divan. A dark figure entered, passed swiftly across the room to the glass bookcase. In the space of a few seconds the newcomer reached shoulder high several times, pressing a hand against the glass. He turned and was suddenly gone, as quietly as he came.

Swiftly Jarnegan followed, through the dark hallway, peered into the lighted living room.

The two brothers, Neale and Bart Fargo, stood in the center of the room, their fists clenched, regarding each other angrily. Dr. Benson sat alone in a corner of the room. Which one had just been in the library?

"Damn you." Neale was saying, "you've hidden that box somewhere. The sheriff doesn't have it! You know that!"

"Murderer," Bart shot back at him. "Trying to hold it out for yourself! You know where it is!"

For a moment longer they stood there glaring, then Bart turned on his heel and walked upstairs. Jarnegan let him go, then slowly skulked after him, keeping well in the shadows. A door closed down the hallway. The detective padded softly to the end of the hall, stepped out on the roof of the long portico. A window gleamed to his right. He peered around the edge.

HELEN FARGO stood before her mirror, clad in brief step-ins and a lace brassiere. She was brushing her hair in long sweeping strokes that caused the flesh of her soft breasts to tremble. The adjoining door opened and Bart Fargo stepped into the room. Helen whirled, saw who it was, and looked relieved. The window was closed but the pantomime was distinct. Eagerly she asked him something and he shook his head, asked something of her. She shrugged and suddenly he had her by the wrist, his face red with anger.

She shook her head violently but he struck her across the mouth and let her drop to the floor. Slowly she rose while he glared down at her. Long white thighs gleamed in the diffused light. The valley between her breasts was a dusky shadow.

A step at a time she moved toward him, her eyes curious, her mouth a red appeal. Slowly her arms slid about his neck. He seemed to fight against her charm, and to find the battle fruitless. For a second he stood there with his mouth on hers, his arms pulling her white body tightly against him. Then he picked her up and carried her toward the corner of the room.

Jarnegan half chuckled and slid out of sight. The next window with the frosted glass would be the bath. On the other side of that must be Bart's own room, as he had come through the bath. Jarnegan knew he had a good twenty minutes.

The house had been searched, but he was inclined to believe the sheriff and his deputies had overlooked the most vital thing of the case. Perhaps the

dead are always with us, reasoned Jarnegan, *but they don't leave fingerprints!*

But Bart Fargo's belongings revealed nothing out of the ordinary. Jarnegan tiptoed into the bath, opened the medicine chest. Grunting a little he pulled down a pair of rubber gloves, held them against his cheek. They still felt warm and they were wrong side out. He started to turn one, heard a step on the other side of the door and flipped off his flashlight.

The opening door shielded him and Bart Fargo slipped quickly through the room. In the bedroom Bart had just left, Jarnegan heard the muffled tones of another man. He had to grin a little at the nearness of Bart's escape. Neale Fargo was now in the room with his wife.

FOR a full ten minutes Jarnegan crouched in the darkness praying to his gods for luck. Presently he heard Bart's door open and close. He entered that room. At the hallway he crouched again, listening. He thought he had the thing well in hand now. If only that teakwood box turned out to be what he thought!

Down the hallway, across to the room of the murder, the door clicked shut behind him. He risked the ray of the flashlight, felt far back beneath the mattress and emerged with the teakwood box. The trip beneath the bedclothes had obscured most of the printing. Only a few letters of the legend remained, "*Th d ad ar lw ys wl s.*"

He turned it over and over in his hands, shook it. No answering rattle. He slid his thumb nail about the bottom edge, and suddenly with a little click the top flew up. The box was empty in the finger of light. Jarnegan started to reach into it, to jab along the inside, for it looked shallow, too shallow. Suddenly something descended on his head and a pair of hands reached about his throat.

The flashlight went out. Over and over Jarnegan rolled in the darkness with his assailant, knocking over furniture, crashing against the wall. Again and

again he drove fists into the body before him, but ever those sinewy fingers gripped deeper and deeper into his throat.

Against the far wall Jarnegan almost gave up. A bit at a time he inched his knees up, and suddenly with a tremendous effort, his dying effort, he hooked a foot into his assailant's groin, kicked upward and outward. Fingernails tore strips of skin from his throat, but the hands came loose. The man lit against the far wall. Jarnegan closed his eyes and fought for consciousness.

FEET clattered on the stairs. The lights flipped on. Neale Fargo stood in the doorway, his faithless wife at his shoulder. His startled eyes swept over the room. He saw Jarnegan lying against the wall, Raga, the servant in a corner, both seemingly unconscious. But the focal center of his gaze was the open teakwood box in the exact middle of the floor. He crouched over it, while Bart ran in from the hallway followed by Dr. Benson.

Bart snatched a heavy candlestick from the mantel, raised it threateningly. "No you don't damn you! I'll have that box or beat your brains out! I know it isn't empty, I know it has a false bottom, and I know what's in it! You'll get the rest of the estate but the necklace is mine!"

Neale shrank from beneath the uplifted weapon. Bart jerked the box from his hand.

Against the wall Jarnegan shook the pain from his addled head, tugged at his pocket.

"Just a minute, men," he said shakily. Bart whirled, saw the gun. "Now get over against the wall, please," said Jarnegan.

He opened the window, blew a sharp blast on a whistle and turned back to the group.

"What do you think is in that box?" he asked.

"Three hundred thousand dollars worth of diamonds, shamus," gloated Bart, "and they haven't a thing in the world to do with you."

Two anxious deputies crowded into the room. "If you value your life," said Jarnegan slowly, "don't touch that box." He thrust the gun in his pocket, extracted a long yellow lead pencil, and walked to the table.

"I may be wrong," he said, "but look."

AT THE bottom of the box he started probing cautiously with the rubber on the pencil holding his hand and wrist as far away as possible. Suddenly he touched the far corner. There was a whirr like the releasing of a clock spring. A thin strip of metal seemed to emerge from the wood itself, to strike in a gleaming arc that would have hit the back of Jarnegan's hand had he probed with his fingers.

"Your stepmother," said Jarnegan dryly, "must have hated you as greatly as you hated her. It was a neat little trap and it got Ann Fargo. I have an idea there's enough poison on that released blade to get another one or two of you."

"She couldn't have been poisoned" gasped Dr. Benson. "Why her heart--"

"There are several poisons, doctor, that leave that effect. I'm surprised at you. *Upas* for one, *arrow poison*. Hardly discernible in an autopsy. As for the diamonds you'd better smash the box to get them out!"

"What'll we do with this guy, Jarnegan?" A deputy held Raga in the corner.

"Nothing now," grinned Jarnegan. "He thought he'd caught a prowler or another murderer. Let him alone. But you might take this one with you for the murder of Mrs. Fargo."

Bart Fargo laughed, but that laughter was the only sound in the room.

"You must be kidding," said Bart. "I've got a perfect alibi. Have you checked it?"

Jarnegan shook his head. "I don't have to check it. I know what you did. How long have you been away?"

"Three years. What's that got to do with--?"

"Raga, what awakened you last night?"

"The dog, sir. He growled first and I go out. See nothing so come back. Pretty soon hear noise in this room and come in."

"How old was the dog?"

"Two years we have him, sir." Bart laughed again. "I suppose I came here, killed her, went away again and returned later after establishing an alibi at a filling station?"

"Yep, I expect that's exactly what you did. One of you killed your stepmother and the one that did it wasn't known to the dog. He wouldn't have growled if it had been Neale."

"Tell me some more," sneered Bart lighting a cigarette with steady hands.

"Okay. Stop me when I'm wrong. First, to take a little wind out of your sails I might as well tell you that I hid that teakwood box this afternoon myself. Also I've been in the house an hour or so and heard the two of you quarrel over its disappearance. Just luck there, I'll admit. But listen from here on.

*"I think you meant to kill the whole family!* You started to knife your step mother and had to hide when your sister Ann came in trying to snatch the teakwood box for herself. She sprang it, got scratched with the poison blade and thought the box was empty--so she left. Maybe you saw that, maybe you didn't. Anyway she left the box on the table and went back to her room. You came in and did your work, left your fingerprints on everything--"

"My fingerprints? They aren't my prints!" Jarnegan waved him to silence.

--and to be dramatic wrote your little sentence on the box. You didn't know until afterward that a quarter million or so in diamonds was in its false bottom!

"WHEN you left the dog jumped you and you had to kill him. That gave you another idea. You soaked up a lot of blood in a handkerchief or something and slipped into your sister's room. You were willing to choke her into unconsciousness if she fought, but to your surprise she didn't make a sound! She was poisoned then but of course you didn't know that.

"You tore her clothing, covered her with blood, and was going to put the dagger in her hand, but before you could get into the hall Dr. Benson made a midnight call on his sweetheart. You hid somewhere and after he left the excitement began. You dropped out the window, beat it to the filling station and pretended you were on your way out here instead of coming from here. Are you following me?"

"Ridiculous!" Bart was disdainful. "What motive would I have? I share in nothing, I'm cut off entirely. And aren't you overlooking the fingerprints?"

"Dead men don't leave fingerprints, Fargo! And as for motive, you had every motive in the world including Revenge, Hate, Jealousy, Profit and even Love!"

"Prove it," sneered Bart.

"Revenge against the woman that cut you off, your stepmother. Hate and Jealousy combined against your brother and sister. Your brother particularly, because he married the woman you loved. Since we're calling spades, spades--he married your mistress!"

Neale sprang toward his brother but Jarnegan restrained him. His voice was low.

"As for Profit. Your stepmother dead, your sister dead and your brother dead! Who inherits? Your brother's wife--*your mistress!* Anything farther?"

Bart was still defiant. "You'll have a hell of a time convincing a jury of that! How about those fingerprints. They aren't mine."

"Yes they are, Fargo, and here they are!" Jarnegan drew the rubber gloves from his pocket. "Very, very clever but it's been done before. Sponge rubber cast skillfully, exactly the way a rubber stamp maker casts a signature. Then just as skillfully, applied to the fingertips of rubber gloves. That was your mistake. It was too perfect. Only you or Neale knew about your father's hobby of collecting prints, knew his index would be found eventually.

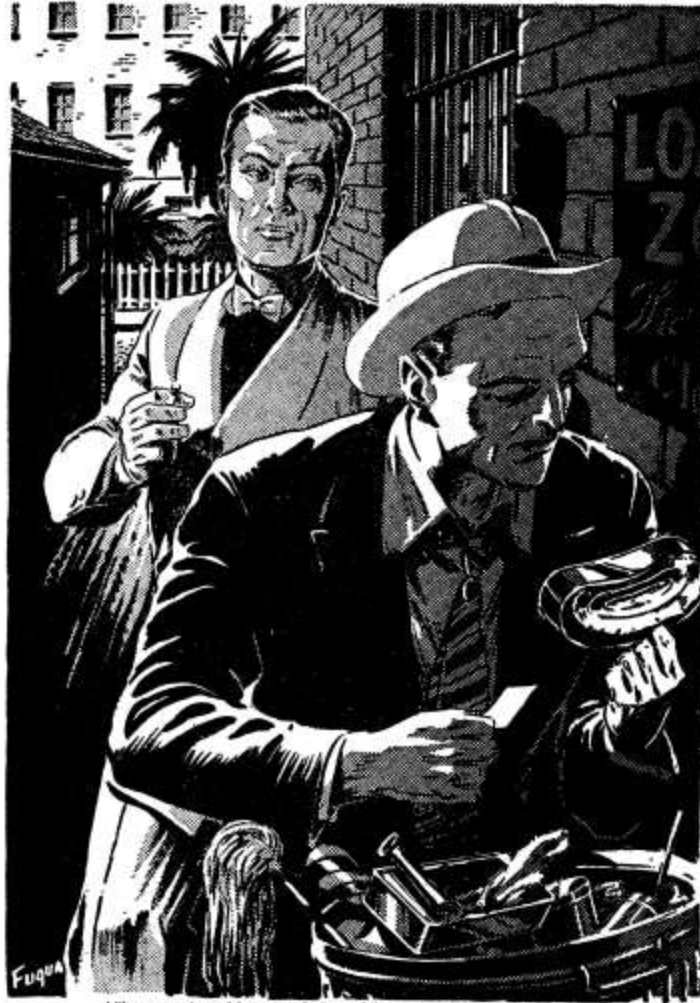
"Neale fell into your trap and pointed them out but you overstepped by being theatrical, by overdoing. I saw you making dead-man's prints in the library about nine fifteen this evening."

Bart Fargo threw back his head and laughed. "That's the best I ever heard," he roared and seemed to stagger with glee. Suddenly he dived for the door. Smith, the laconic deputy, fired once. Fargo hurtled into darkness, then crashed down the steps.

From the top of the stairway the group looked down at the great hulk of his body. "By golly," said the deputy in awestricken tones, "I hit him!"

"I believe you did," said Jarnegan, and looked about for his hat.

## Don't Fence Me Out By Brett Halliday



Mike, unconscious of being watched, carefully examined the empty tin

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*To learn why a civilian was shot down by an Army sentry, Mike Shayne began digging into garbage cans.*

AN ARMED sentry stood outside the closed door. He nodded and opened the door when the rangy detective said, "I'm Mike Shayne."

There were four uniformed men inside the room. Captain Ott, Military Intelligence, sat behind a flat-topped desk. Another officer sat at his right. A soldier, wearing the three stripes of a buck sergeant, stood a little back from in front of the desk with folded arms, his bronzed face impassive. A private stood at rigid attention in front of Captain Ott's desk. He was young and he looked frightened. His thin cheeks were freckled and beads of sweat stood on his forehead.

Captain Ott nodded as the door closed behind the Miami private detective. He said, "You got here in a hurry, Mike."

Shayne said, "I was going out for breakfast when your call caught me." He pulled off his hat and looked around at the others with a questioning glint in his gray eyes.

Captain Ott leaned back in his swivel chair and said casually, "This is Captain Richards. And Sergeant Blake. And Private Carson. Michael Shayne."

Captain Richards nodded and grunted something. He had a square, harsh face with round, unblinking eye. Sergeant Blake said, "I'm pleased t meet you, sir." Private Carson said nothing. He held himself very stiff and continued to stare at the wall over Captain Ott's head.

Shayne ran knobby fingers through his bristly red hair and went past the desk to a chair at Ott's left. A muscle was jumping in the private's tight jaw.

"I called you over," Ott told him, "because we may need your help. Private Carson killed a man last night."

Shayne got a cigarette from his shirt pocket and waited for the captain to go on.

"In line of duty. Private Carson was walking post on guard last night at one of our installations on the keys south of here. At two-thirty a civilian approached his post. Private Carson ordered him to halt but the man continued forward. He repeated the order, and after the third "Halt" he added the warning, "or I'll fire." The man continued forward, and in the

moonlight was seen to thrust his hand inside his coat. Private Carson fired, as was his duty. The man fell forward, then got to his knees and attempted to level a pistol. Carson fired again, killing him."

Shayne shrugged and lit his cigarette.

"He must have been drunk, deaf, or nuts."

"It would seem so," Ott agreed drily. "He was not drunk." He glanced down at a notation in front of him. "From papers on the body, the dead man has been identified as Lester Moore, of Coral Gables."

Shayne frowned down at his cigarette. "Dinky Moore? Short and slight? Dark-featured?"

Ott glanced at Captain Richards. He nodded. "That about fits him, doesn't it, Sergeant?"

The sergeant said, "To a T, Sir."

"Captain Richards is Company Commander," Ott explained. "And Sergeant Blake was Sergeant of the Guard last night."

SHAYNE crossed one knee over the other and slowly exhaled smoke. His forehead was corrugated above bushy red brows. "Dinky Moore wasn't deaf nor crazy. A cheap punk--out for any crooked dollar he could get his hands on." He shook his head. "I can't see Dinky walking up against an Army forty-five."

"That's the curious thing. He didn't seem at all afraid. As though he was positive there was no real danger. Isn't that the impression you got, Carson?"

"Yes, Sir." The young private kept his eyes straight ahead. His voice trembled. "He kept right on coming. Didn't say a word."

Shayne said, "This post on the keys. Is it by any chance the same post where practically this same thing happened not more than a month ago?"

"It is," Ott told him flatly. "In that case, the man approached the front gate which was open. He was unarmed, but disregarded the sentry's warnings in almost the same manner. It was proved, however, that he was quite drunk. We considered his death accidental until--" The Captain spread out his hands.

"You think there's a tie-up?"

"It could be coincidence, but--" The Military Intelligence officer doubled his hands up into fists. "Since we entered the war there have been perhaps a dozen such unfortunate deaths throughout the country. Irresponsible youngsters showing off, or drunks. It's pushing coincidence pretty far to have two of those deaths occur at one isolated post under almost identical circumstances within a few weeks of each other."

"You think," said Shayne carefully, "that Dinky Moore thought the fix was on? That he took the sentry's warnings as just a gesture--expecting another sentry to be on duty?"

"I'm afraid I am thinking along that line. That's why I called you in, Shayne. To help with the outside investigation, if you will. You know Miami--and men like this Dinky Moore. If we could get a line on his late activities--"

"Do you suspect attempted sabotage?"

"I don't know what I suspect, Shayne." Ott's voice was weary. "I will tell you this: The military establishment in question is one of our most closely guarded military secrets. So far as I know, you are the first civilian to be told that it is, in reality, a secret submarine base for our Caribbean pig-boats. Captain Richards commands the infantry company on detached service to guard the installation. The navy personnel for refueling and refitting submarines live and work underground in carefully camouflaged quarters and shops."

Shayne tugged at the lobe of his left ear and nodded slowly. "It's a well-kept secret. I thought it was just a small post for our coastal patrol. Air-raid warning or something."

CAPTAIN OTT said crisply, "That's what everyone is supposed to think. The need for secrecy has been drilled into Captain Richards' infantrymen. They are allowed only rare six-hour passes off the post which gives them no time for carousing and indiscreet talk in town. No one is allowed inside the wire fence at any time."

"Close-woven wire," Captain Richards put in, "with the three gates under constant guard day and night."

Shayne transferred his attention to the infantry officer. "How often are the guards changed?"

"A new detail every twenty-four hours. Twelve men with a non-commissioned officer in charge. There are four posts," Captain Richards went on to explain. "Three men are assigned to each post. Two hours on duty and four off."

"You were in charge of the detail last night?" Shayne looked at the sergeant.

"From four o'clock yesterday afternoon."

"How did you select the men for their tours of duty on the various posts?"

"I had them count off by fours as they lined up for guard mount. The first four took the first hitch, four to six, on posts one, two, three and four in order. The second group took the second hitch, six to eight."

Shayne considered this for a moment. "Then their position in line determined what time they'd be on duty at which post. Could a man plan where to get in line to be selected for a certain post at a certain time?"

"Not a chance of it." Sergeant Blake shook his head doggedly. "We vary the routine of selection every day just to prevent that. Sometimes we count them off by threes--one, two and three for Post Number One, and so on. Sometimes we start at the other end. And sometimes we have them pull numbers out of a hat."

Shayne shook his head hopelessly. "Then no man could know before guard mount which post he would be walking at a certain period?"

"That's right."

"And you don't allow any trading of posts or tours after the men are assigned?"

"No, sir. That is--not officially. Sometimes the men may trade around a little among themselves." The sergeant darted an embarrassed glance at his captain. "But there wasn't any of that last night. I swear there wasn't."

Private Carson gave a slight start and cleared his throat. Captain Ott asked, "Do you want to add anything to what Sergeant Blake has just told us?"

The youthful soldier wet his lips. "N-no, sir," he stammered. "I--no, sir."

Shayne glanced at Ott. "Is the youngster under arrest?"

"No. Private Carson carried out his orders last night in a soldierly manner. As long as the man refused to halt he had no choice except to fire."

Shayne nodded and got up. "I'll nose around and see what I can find out about Dinky Moore." And he told Captain Richards, "I'd like to look over the ground later, and talk to the other eleven men who were on guard duty."

SHAYNE stopped his car in front of the shabby two-story apartment building and got out. It was on one of the side streets in the business section of Coral Gables, flanked by a neighborhood fruit stand on one side and by a shoe repair shop on the other. Four concrete steps led up from the sidewalk

to the open vestibule. Shayne looked at the names on the mailboxes until he found the one he wanted. The apartment number was 128. An un-painted wooden stairway led directly up from the vestibule. The stairs creaked under his weight as he mounted to a long hallway with rows of numbered doors on each side.

Number 128 was halfway down on the right. He knocked on the thin wooden panel and waited. After a full minute he knocked again.

He heard a shuffling sound inside, then the door opened a few inches and a woman looked out at him. Shayne lifted his hat and asked, "Mrs. Moore?"

She said, "You can come in if you're from the insurance company," and stepped back, pulling the door open. The shade was drawn and the interior of the room was dim. It was also stuffy and hot.

The woman said, "I'm not dressed for company." Her bare feet were thrust into frayed slippers and her blonde hair was in curlers. She wore a short-sleeved kimono of sleazy red silk and apparently nothing else. She held the edges of it together at her left hip with one hand, and there was a wide gap in the front that showed half of one breast. She seemed unaware of this, or uncaring. She waved her right hand toward a wicker armchair and said, "Sit down, Mister--?"

Shayne said, "Mulrooney," and sat down. "You are Mrs. Moore?"

"That's right. Laura Moore." She went past him to a wicker couch and sat down. She was tall and had a swinging stride. She had full lips that drooped petulantly, and her cheeks were flaccid. With a lot of fixing up, Shayne imagined she would be beautiful.

She crossed her legs and said, "When I called you folks this morning the man talked like it might be weeks before you paid off." Her voice was low and husky, with an undertone of anger.

Shayne said, "It may not take that long." He got a small memorandum book from his pocket and unscrewed the cap of his fountain pen.

"It better not. Why should it? It's got to be paid. Everything's in order. I paid the premium myself not more'n a month ago. And I can use that five grand, believe me."

"No doubt. Your husband's name was Lester Moore?"

"That's right. Lester G."

Shayne nodded and wrote in his book. "His occupation?"

She snorted. "Nothing. Not since Tropical Park closed and he quit touting. Naw. He was too good to work." Her voice became shrill. "It was all right for me though. Sure. I could dance my legs off every night. A lot he cared. But he was always hanging around to bum drinks and watching to see I didn't have any fun on the side. I pretty near lost my job two or three times account of him raising the devil when he thought I was dancing too close."

"Where do you work, Mrs. Moore?"

"At the Lido. Say," She narrowed her eyes at him suspiciously. "What's all this got to do with insurance? He's dead, all right. What else matters?" The kimono slipped from one bare thigh as she leaned forward. Again, she didn't seem to notice or didn't mind.

Shayne said, "These are just some necessary formalities. Do you know why your husband went out to that army camp last night?"

"I sure don't. He must of been awful drunk--not to've stopped when the sentry told him."

"What did he tell you when he started out there?"

"Nothing. I didn't know he'd gone. I tell you--I was that flabbergasted when they told me what had happened." She shook her head and made her eyes big and wondering.

"Did he have any particular friends at that camp?"

"None that I know of. Not in particular." Laura Moore sucked in her lips. "He knew some of them I guess. From them being in the Lido. He was always hanging around," she went on vindictively. "Like as if I couldn't be trusted."

"But he must have had some reason to go there at night," Shayne insisted. "You see it's this way--" He took a chance. "It might have some bearing on the payment of double indemnity or not."

"You mean--maybe I get paid double?"

"In case of accidental death, of course. If it was suicide on the other hand--" Shayne paused suggestively.

"Suicide?" She wrinkled her forehead and faltered, "You don't think--?"

"We're simply trying to establish the cause of death," he explained smoothly. He laughed. "After all, that would be a new and novel method of committing suicide."

"And in case of suicide you won't pay off? Is that your game?" Her voice was ragged with anger. "You can't get away with that."

"We're not trying to get away with anything. We want to learn the truth. But if we can't find any other reason for his strange action--" He let the words lie there before her.

"It wasn't suicide. You don't know Dinky," she scoffed. "He wouldn't have the nerve."

"Think hard, then," Shayne urged. "Didn't he ever say anything that might explain what happened?"

"Not a word. He must of been awful drunk. Just wandered out there."

Shayne closed his notebook and got up. He went to the door and turned back with his hand on the knob. "Your husband wasn't drunk, Mrs. Moore. That's been established. Unless we can learn a definite reason for what

happened, I'm afraid I'll have to recommend that we fight your claim on the grounds of suicide." He went out quickly and closed the door behind him.

THE CLUB LIDO was a sprawling one-story structure of ugly brown stucco about half way between Coral Gables and South Miami. It lay a few hundred feet off the highway surrounded by a few dispirited palms. A gravel driveway curved in to a dusty parking lot by the side of the building. There were no other cars in the lot when Michael Shayne pulled in.

It was dark and cool inside, and the stale air had a hangover of beer smell and tobacco smoke from the preceding night. There was a long room with a bar running the length of it fronted by padded leather stools. A fat man with curly hair and twinkling blue eyes rested his bare forearms on the bar and watched Shayne come in. He was the room's only occupant. At the rear was a curtained doorway with a hand-painted sign that said, DANCING. NO LADIES ALLOWED WITHOUT ESCORTS.

Shayne sat at the bar and laid a folded newspaper down beside him. The bartender said, "Mornin'," in a not unfriendly tone.

Shayne said, "I could use a slug of cognac."

The bartender sighed and shook his head. "How'll grape brandy do?"

"California or New York State?"

He turned to look at the array of bottles behind the bar. "We got both. New York's five years old."

Shayne said, "A double shot of that--in the bottom of a beer glass."

A large sign behind the bar caught his eye. It said, HAM & EGGS \$1.50.

The bartender set a beer glass in front of him. It had two ounces of brandy in the bottom. Shayne said, "And an order of ham and eggs."

"We got lots of eggs. No ham." Shayne sloshed the brandy around and wrinkled his nose at the odor. He arched red brows at the sign behind the fat man. "For a buck and a half you ought to have plenty of ham."

The bartender shrugged. "No more ham till the first of the month. Maybe you don't know it, Mister, but we're rationed just like the rest of you."

"It should last at that price."

"But it don't. I was tellin' the boss coupla days ago--why don't we put the price up to two dollars? Maybe we wouldn't always be runnin' out."

Shayne asked, "Make it four eggs, over. Toast and coffee." He took a sip of brandy.

WHEN the bartender came back from giving the order, Shayne had the paper spread out in front of him. A headline read:

### ARMY SENTRY KILLS CIVILIAN

Shayne pointed a forefinger at it and said, "That's the damnedest thing."

"I'll say." The bartender leaned on the counter in front of him. "That Dinky Moore. He musta been nuts."

"The fellow that got killed? You know him?"

"Sure. He was in here last evenin'. He's in here every evenin'. Wife works here and he hangs around watchin' her most of the time."

"Jealous?"

"Plenty. Not that he didn't have a reason to. She's some babe."

"Hostess?"

"Yeh." He jerked his head toward the curtained doorway at the rear. "We got ten of 'em work the joint every night. But that Laura, she's tops. She's got what the soldiers go for--but plenty."

"Lots of soldier trade here?"

"All we do have nowadays. There's the airport and that training center. And we get a little play from that post where Dinky was killed last night. This is the closest joint where they can get any night life on their six-hour passes."

"Is that all they get?"

"That's all. Six hours. Other outfits get twenty-four hours leave. But not them."

"That's funny," Shayne mused. "Way out in a camp like that. You'd think they'd get extra time."

"I dunno." The bartender sounded uninterested. "They gripe about it plenty."

"What do they do at a place like that? I mean, what's the idea setting them out on the keys?"

"I wouldn't know, Mister. And if I did know I wouldn't talk about it." He jerked a spatulate thumb over his shoulder to a gilt sign that said, "DON'T. He MAY Be a SPY."

Shayne grinned and said, "Yeh. I guess you're right." He drained his glass and shuddered. "This Dinky Moore must have been friendly with some of the boys out there, huh? Visiting them at night?"

"He wasn't friendly with nobody." The bartender shook his head. "I sure don't know what he was doin' out there like that. Never took him for a hoppy."

Shayne rustled the newspaper. "That gun in his pocket sounds like he was after somebody. Any of the boys from that camp been particular friendly with his wife?"

"Might be. She goes for some of 'em. Young ones, mostly. You know how a woman gets over a kid in uniform. Boss has warned her a coupla times." The bartender grinned lewdly. "He figures she ought to keep all that for him."

Shayne returned his grin. "Boss goes for her too, huh?"

"If Dinky had wanted to go gunning, he didn't have to look no further than right here."

"But he didn't know about that, I suppose?"

The bartender wrinkled his forehead thoughtfully. "I dunno. You know how it is. Sometimes a man don't see what's right under his nose. And sometimes he don't wanta see. She was knockin' down plenty of jack here."

"He was willing to let her earn a living for him, huh? No matter how she did it?"

The fat man shook his curly head slowly. "I dunno. We usta wonder. Dinky got plenty sore when she fooled with the soldiers. If he'd ever caught her and the boss outright--but he never did."

"How did he act last night? Before he went out there?"

"I didn't notice him special. He was around. Not drinkin' much. Then he wasn't around. And this mornin', wham! There it is spread all over the paper." The bartender waggled his head and went to the kitchen for Shayne's breakfast in response to the ring of the bell.

IT WAS 10:18 by Shayne's watch when he left the Club Lido. He drove at a moderate speed through the town of South Miami, and on south into the rich Redlands, a flat expanse of small truck farms basking in the Florida sun. A short distance north of Homestead, he turned to the left onto a graveled road leading directly toward the ocean. The farming district was left behind after a few miles and the road led through a section of tall Australian pines, which gave way, in turn, to mangroves and stunted palmettos as the shoreline was approached.

The road began twisting, crossing wooden trestles over wide sluggish inlets which rose and fell with the tide, creeping out along a chain of half-submerged islands so it was impossible to determine where the mainland actually left off and the keys began.

It was 11:42 when Shayne stopped in front of an open gate in a ten-foot fence of closely meshed galvanized wire at right angles across the road. A sentry with a bayoneted rifle stood in the middle of the road between the gateposts. Beyond him, the underbrush had been cleared off a twenty-acre area of flat land, none of which was more than five feet above high tide. Three long unpainted buildings stood in the center of the clearing grouped around a flagpole surmounted by the American flag. Another small frame building stood behind the sentry near the gate.

As Shayne got out, the sentry called over his shoulder, "Sergeant of the Guard. Post Number One." And to Shayne, he said, "Advance ten paces to be recognized."

Eight of Shayne's long-legged strides took him up to the guard who stood at attention with his rifle at port arms. A sergeant came trotting from the little frame shack. He was puffing a little as he reached them, and he said, "No civilians allowed in here without a special pass."

Shayne said, "Captain Richards is expecting me. Shayne."

The Sergeant scowled at him dubiously. "Michael Shayne?"

"That's right."

"Prove it."

Shayne got out his wallet and flipped it open to show his private license. The sergeant carefully compared the picture on the license with Shayne's face, then grunted, "All right I guess. You'll have to leave your jalopy outside. Right up there. This end of the first building is the Orderly Room."

The sentry stepped back and Shayne passed between the two men. He looked about keenly as he approached the Orderly Room, but could see nothing whatever except the small clearing to denote human activity on the key.

It was a masterful job of camouflaging a submarine base.

A CORPORAL stopped pounding a typewriter long enough to lead Shayne to a rear door lettered C. O. He rapped on the door, opened it, and said, "Mr. Shayne, sir."

Captain Richards was sitting behind a desk. He surveyed the Miami detective stonily. "Have you made any progress?"

"A little." Shayne tossed his hat on the desk and lowered his body into a chair. "I'd like to see all the men who were on guard duty last night."

The captain called through the open door: "Corporal Yonkers. Bring last night's guard detail into the Orderly Room. I replaced them with a new detail this morning," he added to Shayne.

The redhead nodded. "We probably won't learn much from them."

"I consider this entire investigation a waste of time," Richards told him emphatically. "Captain Ott's fear of sabotage seems to me utter nonsense. What could one man hope to do if he did get in?"

Shayne said, "I agree with you. If he wanted information he could have gotten that from the man he expected to let him in."

"Nonsense. I don't believe he expected to be let in. As I see the affair, it was an accident."

Shayne said, "I think it was murder."

"That's your job, isn't it? To turn accidents into murder. That's the way you make a living." The captain's tone indicated no respect for Shayne's means of livelihood.

Shayne said, "Captain Ott asked me to make this investigation."

Men tramped into the Orderly Room outside. Captain Richards made an impatient gesture and said, "Let's get this over with." He got up and stalked out of the private office.

Shayne followed him out. Twelve privates were lined up at attention. Sergeant Blake saluted and said, "Reporting the guard detail, sir."

Richards growled, "At ease. This is Mr. Shayne, men. A Miami detective investigating the trouble last night. Tell him anything he wants to know." He turned abruptly and went back into his office, shutting the door.

Shayne grinned at the soldiers. They were all young, and all serious-faced. He said, "Even though it embarrasses your captain, I think I'm going to prove that a man was murdered last night."

One of the privates gave a start and opened his mouth as though to protest. It was Private Carson. Shayne said, "Don't take that personally, Carson. Moore's murderer didn't necessarily pull the trigger that killed him." He paused, then demanded, "How many of you knew the dead man?"

No one replied.

"One of you knew him," Shayne told them casually. "He wouldn't have kept coming that way unless he felt sure he knew the man who was pretending to

halt him. That is--" He glanced at the sergeant, "--if we're sure Carson did try to halt him. Has that been verified?"

"Yes, sir," a soldier down the line spoke up unexpectedly. "I was on Number Three Post. I heard Carson yell halt three times. And plenty loud."

Shayne nodded. "Yet none of you admit knowing Moore? All right. How many of you knew his wife?"

There was a shuffling of feet. No other reply.

"Laura Moore. One of the gals at the Lido Club. This one." Shayne's hands described a series of voluptuous curves.

The men glanced at one another covertly. He could hear their breathing quicken, but no one said anything.

"How many of you have been at the Lido Club?" Shayne snapped.

Sergeant Blake answered for him. "Hell, they've all been there. Me too. It's the only place a man can get to with only six hours leave."

"If you've been to the Lido, don't tell me you don't know Laura. Not a bunch of soldiers." Shayne's voice was disbelieving.

Blake grunted, "Maybe we do. They're all hot numbers at the Lido. But you don't have to know a dame's name to--dance with her."

Shayne's cold gaze traveled down the line of men. They stared back at him with stiff resentment. He said, "All right. All of you can go--except Blake and Carson. I want you to show me where it happened." He went into the captain's room without knocking.

Richards looked up and grunted, "Well. Which one are you going to frame for murder?"

Shayne's eyes were cold and bright. "I don't know--yet. How friendly were you with Laura Moore?"

The captain rose slowly. "You'd better get out of here, Shayne. I told Ott this morning that the military should handle its own investigation."

Shayne said, "I want all of the guard detail given a six-hour pass tonight."

Richards was breathing heavily. "I'll issue the orders around here."

Shayne said, "That's fine. I want to see them all at the Club Lido." He went out.

"RIGHT here is where it happened." Sergeant Blake stopped in front of a ten-foot gate in the wire fence. The gate was the same heavy mesh wire. The sergeant pointed through the gate at a pair of ruts leading through the underbrush.

"He was walking up that road. You can see the blood where he fell. About twenty feet away."

Shayne stared through the wire, tugging at his ear-lobe. There was a well-worn path along the inside of the fence. A soldier wearing a webbed pistol belt came marching along the path as they stood there. He passed them with a curious glance and kept on down the path.

"That's the guard on Post Number Two," the sergeant explained. "He walks this whole east side of the fence. Takes him about five minutes to cover it."

Shayne glanced at the ruts leading through the gate and the underbrush toward the camp clearing behind them.

"Where does this road go? What's this gate for?"

"It goes to the supply dump. Mess and commissary. The trucks come in this way. This road runs east about half a mile and then swings north to the highway."

"And this gate is kept locked?" Shayne stepped forward to examine it. It was a heavy latch lock, made to snap shut when the gate was closed.

"That's right. We only unlock it when there's trucks coming in."

"Show me exactly where you were standing last night," Shayne told the young private who was standing a few paces back, very much ill-at-ease.

Private Carson gulped self-consciously. "I was coming from back there." He pointed behind him. "I saw this man walking up the road. I hurried a little to get here in front of the gate, and called my first halt when he was about forty paces away. He kept right on coming like he didn't hear me. I--I yelled Halt twice more and then I--I didn't know what else to do but shoot." He set his lips tightly and gave Shayne an agonized glance.

"No one's blaming you," Blake told him gruffly. "At least, they got no right to." He gave the detective a dirty look.

"You did some damned good shooting," Shayne said calmly to Carson. He frowned and took off his hat to rumple his hair irritably. "Why the hell was Dinky Moore walking up that road at two o'clock in the morning? Could he have mistaken it for another road?"

"Don't see how," Blake said doubtfully. "Here's something else that looks funny, Mr. Shayne. When we came back from Miami this morning, we found the car he was driving. He'd left it parked about a quarter of a mile down the road. Captain Ott found his fingerprints on the steering wheel."

"What kind of car?"

"A station wagon. It was reported stolen from the Club Lido early this morning."

"A quarter of a mile down the road?" Shayne mused. He asked Carson, "Did you hear the car stop?"

"No, sir. I didn't hear anything. Not while I was walking post."

"It's nuts," Shayne said impatiently. "He parks his car and walks up here to a locked gate armed with a pistol. But didn't make any attempt to shoot you as he walked up?" he demanded sharply.

"No, sir." The private shook his head with dogged determination and held his head high. "I can't rightly claim self-defense. He didn't make any motion towards his gun till I'd said I'd fire, and was leveling down on him. Seemed like he just suddenly got the idea I meant it. But I had to shoot the second time because I saw his gun was out."

"Sure you did," Blake growled. He turned his head and spat on the ground. "It ain't murder when you obey orders. No matter what anybody says."

Shayne said, "I know you're all sore because I'm a civilian investigating what you consider a purely military affair. But this is still murder, and don't forget it." He turned and stalked away, following the road back to the clearing.

He was just emerging from the thick underbrush when he heard a low, "Hey," from one side. He saw a uniform behind a clump of palmetto, and an extended finger beckoning to him. He turned aside and recognized one of the privates who had faced him in the Orderly Room a short time previously.

"MY NAME'S Murtry," he told Shayne. "I wanted a chance to talk to you where there couldn't no one see us." He was a short stocky lad, with swarthy features and flashing white teeth.

Shayne said, "All right," and stepped farther back into the concealing underbrush with the private. "What's on your mind?"

"Jim Carson is my buddy," the soldier told him. "Is--is he in any real trouble about that shooting last night?"

Shayne studied Murtry's troubled face for a moment, then nodded slowly. "Plenty."

"How can you call it murder? Jim had a right to shoot him. It was his duty." Private Murtry sounded as though it was an argument that had been going on over and over in his mind.

"That's the way it looks at first glance. But I'm pretty sure the man was lured here just to get shot. I'm going to prove it."

"In that case," said Murtry doggedly, "there's something I got to tell you."

Shayne tipped his hat back and waited.

"I ain't a snitcher. That's why I hope you won't tell no one who told you-- why I didn't want to be seen talking to you."

Shayne said, "I can keep my mouth shut."

The soldier drew in a long breath. "Something I heard last night. One of the other fellows on guard--Dave Laski--he was trying to get Jim to swap posts with him. Dave was on Number One."

"I thought that was against regulations."

"It is. That's why I didn't say nothing before. And Jim Carson wouldn't tell-- not till hell froze over. Even if he don't like Laski. But the boys do trade posts sometimes. The Old Man would raise hell if he ever found out. He's strictly military."

"This Dave Laski was trying to get Carson to trade posts with him? In other words, he wanted to have the detail Carson was on?"

"That's right. I heard them talking right after mess. He offered Jim five bucks to trade off."

"Did he say why?"

"N-no. But I guess Jim knew all right. You see, it's this way--" Murtry glanced around guiltily to be sure they were screened from prying eyes.

"I wouldn't tell you except that you're trying to get Jim in trouble. There'd be hell to pay if the Old Man ever found out. But some of the boys--sometimes when they're on that post at night--they have one of the girls come out from the Lido."

"While they're on duty?"

"Sure. I know it sounds bad, but it's damn' near the only chance a man ever gets to have a girl around here. We never get off the post. It's like we were in jail."

"This Laski. Is he one of them that makes a habit of having girls visit him while he's on guard?"

"Well, he's one of them, I guess. He's always bragging about one of the skirts there that'll jump through a hoop when he hollers. The way they work it, see, is the guard on Number Two, he lets the girl in. And some of his buddies are waiting there in the woods--"

"Wait a minute," Shayne interrupted. "How does he get the gate unlocked?"

"They've--got an extra key to it. They keep it hid there under a rock by the gate."

"How many men know about the extra key?"

"I guess we all do. All except some of the nom-coms that suck around after the Old Man. But there's not many of them that'd ever use it," he added.

"Just Laski and some of that bunch."

"Which one is Laski?"

"He was--second from the head of the line, I think--in the Orderly Room. Tall guy. Older than most of us. Sort of goodlooking and with a line that the dolls fall for."

Shayne narrowed his eyes, recalling the faces of the men in the Orderly Room. He nodded slowly. "What's your opinion?" he asked abruptly.

"What about?"

"Laski. And the dead man. Was Laski playing around with the dead man's wife?"

"I don't know. I swear I don't. I go to the Lido with Jim sometimes, but not much. I just thought maybe you ought to know--about Dave Laski trying to get on Number Two last night. And I knew Jim'd never tell you."

Shayne said, "There's one other thing. You said some of the boys phone the Lido asking a girl to come out. Can you get to a phone while you're on guard duty?"

"Well, yeh. There's a booth in the P X. We're supposed to stay in the guardhouse even when we're not walking post, but a man can stop by the P X when he gets to mess."

"But that would be his only chance?"

"Well, it'd be kind of hard to do it any other time. Of course, he might get some other guy to phone for him."

Shayne said, "Thanks. If I use your information I won't tell where I got it."

MICHAEL SHAYNE lounged back in a chair and listened while Captain Ott interrogated Private Dave Laski. Laski was tall and wiry, with smooth features and curly black hair that formed little ringlets on his forehead. He appeared to be about thirty, and was completely self-possessed.

He said, "Sure, I know Laura all right. I know 'em all at the Lido." A faint smirk accompanied the statement. "But I never fooled with Laura much. Not after I found out she wasn't a lay."

"How well did you know her husband?"

"Used to see him around. He was always glaring at some soldier he thought was dancing too close with Laura."

"Ever have any trouble with him that way?" Ott asked sharply.

"Not me." A complacent smile curved Laski's lips. "I leave the married dames to the punks that don't know better."

"Meaning who?"

Laski shrugged. "Nobody in particular. Some of the boys in camp are always getting mixed up with married women."

"Who did you talk to at the Lido last night?"

"Me? I was on guard, sir."

"On the telephone."

"I didn't telephone the Lido last night."

"There was a call from the pay-booth in the P X at mess-time. Who did you talk to, Laski?"

"It wasn't me, sir."

"I think it was." Captain Ott's voice was harsh. "I think you called Moore and arranged to meet him at that gate on the two-to-four hitch, expecting to make a trade with Carson. Later, when Carson refused, you couldn't get to the phone to call it off. As a result, Moore walked right into a death-trap."

Laski shook his head stubbornly. "It wasn't me that called. I swear it wasn't, sir. If you ask me, I think it was Jim Carson," he went on venomously. "And now he's trying to put it off on me by snitching about us having girls come out sometimes."

Ott didn't tell him it wasn't Carson who had blabbed. He demanded, "What makes you think it was Carson?"

"He went into the P X on his way back from mess. And I saw him chumming up with that Dinky Moore at the Lido a couple of weeks ago."

"Did they appear to be friendly?"

"I'll say. Thick as thieves."

"That seems to indicate that Carson hadn't been too friendly with Laura Moore."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. I remember now that he used to dance with her most of the time."

"You're contradicting yourself by trying to switch suspicion to Private Carson," Ott told him wearily. He turned to Sergeant Blake who stood near the door. "Take Laski back to camp. I'll talk to Captain Richards about preferring charges."

When the men had gone the Intelligence officer told Shayne: "I don't like that man but I believe he was telling the truth."

Shayne leaned back and tugged at his ear. "What did you mean about preferring charges?"

"He'll be court-martialed," Ott explained. "Unlocking the gate and admitting civilians to the camp is a pretty serious offense, particularly while a man's on guard duty."

"What's your opinion on it now?" Shayne got out a cigarette.

"From what you've dug up, I'm ready to disregard the probability of sabotage. It looks to me like someone wanted Moore out of the way--and contrived to send him out on some false pretense that made him think the guard's challenge wasn't meant seriously."

"His wife?"

"From what you've told me about her, she seems a logical candidate. She didn't pretend any devastating sorrow, and she was ghoulishly eager about the insurance."

"She isn't going to do too much mourning," Shayne admitted. "But there's that telephone call made from the camp to the Lido."

"Doesn't necessarily mean anything at all. Any one of the boys might have called in to one of the girls. As for what Laski said about Carson: I believe he was fabricating that as he went along--because he thought Carson had accused him."

Shayne nodded agreement. "It didn't make a very plausible story." He sighed and got up. "It's still murder, and I'm going to keep on sticking my nose into it."

IT WAS not yet quite dark but the Lido was already doing a brisk business. The stools were all taken by soldiers and others were crowded up behind them, reaching over the shoulders of sitting men to get their drinks from three overworked bartenders.

A jukebox was going full blast beyond the curtained doorway, and Shayne strolled back to take a look inside. It was a large square room, lined all the way around three walls with wooden booths, leaving the center of the floor free for dancing. The booths had high partitions and curtains that could be drawn in front. There were a scattering of soldiers already in the booths, and two couples were dancing. One of the girls was young and plain-looking, wearing a green sports dress and dancing with her eyes shut, cheek pressed hard against her soldier-partner's chest. The other dancer wore a flimsy evening gown and a lot of rouge and looked as though she had traveled a rough road graduating up to a roadhouse like the Lido. It looked as though the other hostesses hadn't come to work yet.

Shayne turned back into the barroom and got close enough to the bar to order a double shot of brandy. The soldier seated in front of him was

working on a large slice of fried ham and a pair of fried eggs. The ham was beautifully browned and exuded a tantalizing fragrance. As Shayne got his brandy he told the bartender angrily:

"I tried to buy a piece of ham in here this morning and got the brush-off. What do you do, save it for the soldiers?"

"We was out," the bartender said. "Just got that in. An' it won't last more'n a couple of hours."

The ham-eating soldier turned his head and grinned up at Shayne. "Must be tough to be a civilian. Join the army and quit worrying about rationing. We get ham every morning in camp. Not cooked like this though." He took another mouthful and masticated it slowly and enjoyably. "Same damn ham, too, I betcha. What an army cook does to good chow is nobody's business."

Shayne's nostrils twitched. "Ham every morning," he muttered.

"Sure. They bring it in by the truck-load. Whole hams in cans. You could get a dollar a pound for it in one of these black markets you read about."

Shayne drank his brandy. His eyes were bleak. He paid for the drink and went to the end of the bar and through a swinging door into the steaming kitchen.

A sweating cook looked up and scowled at him from in front of a hot range.

Shayne said, "County Health Inspector," and flashed a detective's badge.

The cook's scowl deepened. He said, "Go ahead and look around," wondering what a health inspector was supposed to pry into. He finally asked, "How do you dispose of your empty tin cans?"

"In that box by the door." The cook pointed. "We clean it out every morning and mash 'em up for the Government salvage."

Shayne went over to the box, half full of empty tin cans. A large kidney-shaped can lay on top of the rest. It was labeled Hormel, and it smelled of ham.

He picked it up and looked at the bottom. It was stamped USA Quartermaster Corps. He dropped it in the box and turned to go out. His way was blocked by a man as tall as himself who had come up behind him soundlessly. He recognized Grant Zenro, proprietor of the Lido. Zenro wore a faultlessly tailored suit of white pongee with white and tan sport shoes and a tan polo shirt.

Zenro said, "Is the detecting business so bad that you've started looking through garbage barrels, Shayne?" A threadlike black mustache quivered on his upper lip.

Shayne said, "The detecting business is looking up. I've been wondering where you got your hams."

"And?"

Shayne shrugged. "Now I know."

Grant Zenro smiled with his lips but his eyes were humid. "Perhaps you'd like to talk this over in my office."

Shayne said, "Sure."

Zenro turned and led the way out of the kitchen through a side door opening into the dance room. There were five couples dancing now, and more soldiers in the booths.

LAURA MOORE came out of a room marked LADIES just as they emerged from the kitchen. She wore a glittering sequin evening gown and in her makeup was, as Shayne had surmised that morning, an exceedingly attractive piece of lush womanhood. She started a warm smile for Zenro, but it faded when she recognized Shayne behind him. She narrowed her eyes and stepped forward to put her hand on Grant Zenro's arm.

"That's the insurance man I was telling you about, Grant. What's he doing here?"

Zenro stared at her, then looked back at Shayne. "Do you mean Mr. Shayne?"

"He told me his name was Mulrooney or something."

Zenro gave her a little push and said quietly, "Go on to work, Laura. I'll take care of this."

He turned to the right and opened a door marked PRIVATE, stood aside for Shayne to precede him inside.

It was a big office with modernistic furnishings and soft, indirect lighting. Shayne pulled a chromium and leather chair around to the front of the black and white desk, and sat down.

Grant Zenro walked past him and around the desk. He leaned forward with his knuckles on the glass top. "All right, Shayne. What kind of a shakedown are you working on?" His voice was suave and modulated with just a hint of weariness.

Shayne shook his red head. "This isn't a shakedown."

"Are you working for the insurance company--trying to prove Dinky Moore's death a suicide to evade payment?"

Shayne shook his head again. "On the contrary. I'm going to prove Dinky was murdered."

Zenro sat down slowly. He opened a drawer and got out a long black cigar, turned it over and over in his fingers, frowning down at it. "Does that tie in with your snooping around my kitchen?"

Shayne said, "I think it does."

Zenro put the cigar in his mouth. "How?"

"Dinky drove your station wagon last night."

"Without my knowledge or permission."

"Maybe so." Shayne's tone was noncommittal.

Zenro flipped a chromium desk lighter into flame and leaned forward to suck fire into his cigar. He countered, "I reported it stolen this morning."

SHAYNE didn't say anything. Jukebox music came faintly through the closed office door. Grant Zenro leaned back and pointed the tip of his cigar toward the ceiling. He asked around it, "What are you trying to prove?"

Shayne said, "There must be a nice profit in ham and eggs--at a buck fifty a throw."

"When we can get the ham," Zenro agreed indifferently.

"The Army has lots of it. Whole hams in cans."

Zenro sighed. He said, "So, all right. Maybe some of the boys pick up a can sometimes to trade off for the price of an evening's fun. Can I help it if maybe my cook makes a deal?"

"An occasional deal like that wouldn't be anything to raise too much hell about," Shayne agreed. "But when murder gets mixed up with it, that's something else."

"So, we're back to murder, are we?"

Shayne nodded. "That's the way it looks to me."

"I don't know anything about Dinky Moore getting bumped. I don't know what he was doing in my station wagon, nor why he was out there."

"But it wasn't inconvenient," Shayne said quietly. "It must have cramped your style--having a jealous husband around underfoot all the time."

Zenro's black eyes blazed hotly for a moment. "Who gave you that steer?"

"I had a long talk with Laura this morning."

"Damn a woman that--" Zenro checked himself. He took another puff on his cigar. "What are you after?"

"Dinky Moore's murderer."

"What'll you be satisfied with?"

"Nothing less."

Grant Zenro nodded slowly. His smooth, clean features were impassive.

"Nothing more?"

"That's all I'm after. Look." Michael Shayne leaned forward. "If some fifty-a-month buck private picks up an occasional can of Army ham and wants to trade it off for your rot-gut, I'm not going to make a stink."

"Fair enough," said Zenro equably. "I'll see what I can do about the other." He paused, tapping manicured nails on the glass desk top. "What have you got?"

"You could have sent him out there--as you've sent some of your girls out to keep a date when the right man was on guard."

"Go on."

Shayne spread out his hands. "That's about all," he confessed. "Dinky drove your wagon out and parked it down the road, walked up to the gate thinking the fix was on and expecting the gate to be opened for him. He had been told that's what to expect--by someone. He walked into it blind. He didn't even try to pull a gun until it was too late."

Zenro's upper lip twitched. "Do you think you can hang it on me?"

"I don't know." The redhead frowned speculatively. "I can prove motive and opportunity. You never know how a jury will react."

"But you can ruin me," said Zenro bitterly. "And my business--just by bringing me to trial even though I can't be convicted."

"That's about the way it is."

"You'd frame your grandmother wouldn't you, Shayne? Just to crack a tough case?" Zenro's voice was thin with fury.

"This isn't any frame. I'm talking about facts."

"You can't get a conviction."

"I can try."

"But you'd rather have a cinch case, wouldn't you?"

"Sure."

"All right. I'll give you one."

"I'm listening," Shayne said softly.

He leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"Suppose I gave you a soldier that had made a deal with Dinky. To come out there at night while he was on guard at that gate and deliver him some stuff--hams, say?"

Shayne rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. "I need a motive."

"How about Laura?"

"Do you mean she's in love with this soldier?"

"He could be in love with her." Zenro's voice was harsh. "Lots of them are." He laughed shortly. "Kids away from home."

"Here's something that would be better." Shayne stared down at his cigarette. "If she'd led the kid on--promised to marry him, maybe. That would tie it up in a knot. With the insurance money as an additional incentive."

"Damn you, Shayne! So you are working for the insurance company?"

"Why no." Shayne looked surprised. "I told you--"

Zenro exploded, "The hell with what you told me. That'd be as good as suicide, wouldn't it? She can't collect if you frame her into a position as accessory."

"I hadn't thought about that."

"Nuts." Grant Zenro stood up. His upper lip twitched away from his teeth. "Get out of here."

Michael Shayne remained seated. He stretched his long legs out in front of him and contemplated the toes of his shoes. "I've still got you for a fall guy."

Zenro said, "By God," very softly.

Shayne dropped his cigarette and toed it out on the thick rug. Without looking at the Lido proprietor, he said, "A phone call was made here from the army camp last night. Know anything about it?"

"Should I?"

"It might help," Shayne said blandly. "If it was for Dinky--and if you happened to answer the phone yourself. You might recognize the voice." He stood up and yawned. "Think it over." He opened the door and went out.

THE DANCE floor was crowded. Michael Shayne stood outside Zenro's office and surveyed the dancers moodily. He recognized some of the

soldiers who had faced him in the Orderly Room that morning. Private Murtry, who had given him the dope on Laski, was dancing with Laura Moore. Dave Laski was dancing with a slim redhead who leaned back and laughed up into his face while his hand pressed against the small of her back held her firmly against him.

Sergeant Blake came away from the bar to meet Shayne when he strolled into the front room. The sergeant had a glass of beer and his face was flushed. He said, "I was to present Captain Richards' compliments, sir, and say all the men are here."

Shayne nodded. He saw Captain Ott standing inconspicuously at the front of the bar and he moved in that direction.

"Anything doing?" Ott asked sharply.

Shayne grinned and tugged at his ear. "I'm tightening a few screws. Something is going to snap." He hesitated. "I'm going to talk to the widow. Have Blake round up Murtry, Carson and Laski. Bring them into Zenro's office when I go in with Mrs. Moore."

The dance was just ending when he reentered the rear room. Before the jukebox could start grinding out another tune, he went across the floor to Murtry and Laura Moore who were standing together. He tapped the private on the arm and said, "I think the lady wants to sit this one out."

Private Murtry turned with his mouth open to expostulate. His lower jaw sagged when he recognized the redheaded detective. "Sure," he stammered. "Sure," and hastily stepped backward.

Laura was breathing hard and her eyes were baleful. In her husky voice, she demanded, "What's the big idea? I'm paid to dance with these boys."

Shayne took her bare arm. It was warm and firmly fleshed. He said, "It won't hurt you to miss one," and guided her to an empty booth.

A WAITER was hovering in the doorway by the time they were seated opposite each other. Shayne shook his head and said, "Just pull the curtain and leave us alone."

The waiter hesitated, glancing at Laura. She nodded and said, "It's okay, Joe."

He drew the curtain across the entrance and went away. Laura Moore put her hands flat on the table and demanded, "What were you talking to Grant about, and what'd he call you instead of Mulrooney?"

"I was talking to Zenro about Dinky's death, and my name's Shayne. Michael Shayne," he amended harshly.

Some of the color went away from Laura's cheeks. "Mike Shayne! The dick?"

He nodded. "And not a damned bit interested in your insurance troubles."

She leaned back, full breasts heaving beneath the flimsy cloth that only provocatively pretended to cover them. "What are you after?"

"Your husband's murderer."

"Still harping on that?" she asked contemptuously.

He said, "Grant's not going to marry you. You were a fool to think he would."

"What are you talking about?"

"He just told me so. He swears there's never been anything between you. That you just work here."

"Why, that--" Laura caught herself and narrowed her eyes. "What are you trying to do?"

"Just putting you straight," Shayne told her wolfishly. "Grant's throwing you over. He can't afford to get mixed up in a murder rap."

Her breathing was loud in the closed booth. She took a long time before replying. Then she chose her words carefully: "That's all right with me. God knows, it'll be a relief to be rid of him. But I don't know what you mean by being mixed up in a murder rap."

She sounded truthful. Shayne scowled and said, "He told me you were nuts about him."

She threw back her head and laughed. "That's Grant for you. Just because he's the boss and we play up to him."

Shayne sighed. He got up and pulled the curtain aside. "I want to hear you tell him that."

"All right. Why shouldn't I?" She got up defiantly. "I don't have to keep on working in this dump. Soon as I collect that insurance I can tell them all where to head in." She followed him around the dancing couples.

They passed Captain Ott who was lounging just outside the curtained doorway. Shayne nodded to him, went on to Zenro's office and pulled the door open. Laura Moore went in ahead of him.

Grant Zenro's eyes widened when he saw her. Shayne stepped between them. "You'd better think fast, Zenro. Laura's spilled all about Dinky and the hams."

"I only told Dinky I'd buy them if he brought them here," Zenro snarled. "I didn't know--"

"Shut up, Grant," Laura cried. "He's tricking us. I didn't tell him anything."

THROUGH the open door behind her, Privates Laski, Murtry and Carson filed into the office. Sergeant Blake was right behind them, and Captain Ott came in last, closing the door.

Grant Zenro got up slowly while Laura shrank back against the wall, biting her underlip while her harried eyes went from one to another of the uniformed men.

"I don't know what kind of convention this is," Zenro began slowly, "but--"

"They're all interested in what you were just saying about Dinky Moore and the hams," Shayne interrupted.

Zenro licked his lips. "All right. I won't deny it. God knows, I'm only trying to stay in business. Sure, I told Dinky I'd buy all the canned hams he could get me at a dollar a pound. He told me he had it all fixed with some soldiers out there."

Shayne said, "I'm damned if I don't believe you, Zenro. Then that telephone call must have been for Laura, wasn't it?"

"Yes. But I didn't know--"

Shayne turned away from him to Ott. "That clears up all the questions that have been bothering me. Laura Moore murdered her husband. She wanted the insurance and she wanted to get rid of him because he cramped her style with his jealous husband act."

"It's a lie," Laura sobbed out. "I didn't."

"I've got enough evidence to hang you," Shayne told her flatly. "You egged Dinky on to going out after those hams by telling him you had it all fixed with one of the soldiers out there. You knew what would happen. When you got that phone call last night--"

"She didn't have anything to do with it." Private Carson stepped forward stiffly, freckles standing out in relief against his white face. "I planned it all. Every bit of it. I got the idea after the other civilian got killed last month. When they didn't do anything to the guard, I saw my chance to get rid of him."

Laura moaned, "Jimmy. Don't--"

"I've got to tell them," he explained steadily. "Do you think I can stand here and hear them accuse you? She didn't know what I meant to do, sir," he told Captain Ott. "I called her last night and told her when I'd be on post so I could unlock the gate and let him in. I--I thought we could get married if he was dead."

Tears ran down his freckled cheeks and he seemed awfully young. He turned suddenly and lunged out the door. Blake made a flying tackle after him.

Captain Ott drew in a long breath and shook his head at Shayne. "You're lucky the kid is young enough to believe in the sanctity of love. It sounded like an airtight case you had built up against the lady."

Shayne smiled, tight-lipped. "I thought he'd crack. I knew it had to be Carson ever since this morning, but I didn't know how he'd lured Dinky out there until I dug in a garbage barrel and began turning some screws."

"You knew it was Carson since this morning?" Ott asked incredulously.

"It had to be. Have you seen that mesh wire fence around camp?" Shayne demanded. "He claimed he shot Dinky through the locked gate. The holes in the mesh aren't much bigger than a forty-five slug. One bullet might go through without being deflected, but it was a million-to-one that it wouldn't happen twice in the same night. That gate had to be open while Carson was shooting--which also explained why Dinky thought everything was on the up and up. And that meant Carson was lying from the beginning. Things began to shape up when Murtry told me about the extra key that Laski and the others used." He shrugged his wide shoulders and went out for a drink.