

Ritchie leveled the  
gun on Coyle



# THE TOTTERING IDOL

By NORMAN A. DANIELS

*Assistant District Attorney Jack Coyle ingeniously ferrets out a blackmail plot that has some baffling murder angles!*

THE man who opened the door for Jack Coyle, Assistant District Attorney, was tall, slender, white-haired and distinguished-looking. He went precisely with the house he occupied, and especially with the decorous, large and stately reception hall.

Ernest Barnard's usually smiling features were twisted into what Coyle thought were lines of pain. Not the physical kind, but the keener, more intense mental sort.

"Jack," Barnard said, "I was so afraid you might not be in. Or too busy to come to see me."

Coyle dropped his hat on a chair. "You know I'd never be too busy to do whatever you wanted of me. After what you've done for me."

Barnard waved a hand impatiently and led the way into the living room. He spoke as he walked.

"I don't want you to be grateful, Jack. It is true that I financed you all the way

through college and gave you a start. But I also did that for a man who has become an excellent doctor, another who is an architect, another a chemist, rising rapidly. Helping young men toward success happens to be a hobby of mine. I want nothing in return.”

“I know that too,” Coyle agreed.

“And I’ve told you why, Jack,” said Barnard. “You and the others I have helped are definite assets to the world. Some men like to create monuments to themselves—endow colleges, put themselves up on a great big pedestal. What beneficence I can offer is more direct, more useful, for I not only make useful men, I also benefit humanity. Sit down, Jack.”

Coyle selected a deep cushioned chair. He knew Barnard had something terribly serious on his mind. The man was in trouble or he would never have called for an attorney.

Barnard lit a slim cigar. His hands shook just the slightest, but he managed to smile a trifle.

“I have helped, roughly speaking, fifty boys,” he went on. “Of course, fully two-thirds are now successful men. The doctor treats me and won’t take a fee. The architect wants to build me a new house. The chemist invented some new dry cleaning process and named it after me when I refused to accept any of his royalties. I have never asked any of my boys for help. But I’m asking you, Jack.”

“Please go on,” Coyle urged. “No matter what it is, you know you have my promise of all the aid I can furnish.”

**B**ARNARD nodded, highly pleased. Then he grimaced.

“Your being on the District Attorney’s staff complicates things, but I have no one else I can trust. Perhaps you won’t be so eager when I’ve finished. Here is the story

. . . Maybe you’d like a drink first?”

“If you believe I’ll need one to help me stand the shock of whatever terrible story you’re about to tell me,” Coyle said, and laughed.

“You’ll need one. Perhaps several, and I need one myself.”

Barnard mixed two stiff highballs, handed one to Coyle and sat down again. He immediately began his story.

“I’m not quite as wealthy a man as I’m reputed to be. I haven’t been for years and yet I had to carry on my work somehow. I had to make a lot of money fast. You understand, Jack, it wasn’t for myself. It was for these boys I’ve been helping. Well—you know my personal reputation. I’m an official of my church, a member of civic boards. I’m sort of like—well, an idol. Such a reputation is to be prized by any man. I couldn’t afford to lose it.”

“What happened?” Coyle was beginning to get Barnard’s mood of trouble to come.

“Five years ago I purchased a half interest in the Sundown Inn.”

Coyle whistled. “Ben Ritchie’s luxury gambling house. The biggest and most ornate place in the history of gambling. Go on, Mr. Barnard.”

“I sunk a hundred and fifty thousand dollars into the place. I’ve taken out that much and more since. Ritchie has always played quite fair with me. Sometimes things go against the house and I don’t make very much. Other times the money seems to pour in. And pour out again. I’ve been blackmailed ever since the gambling house really got going.”

“By whom?” Coyle asked grimly.

“You’ll meet him—don’t worry. This man knew I couldn’t afford to have my connection with that place publicized. It would have ruined the reputation I have so carefully devoted my life to building up. So I paid. Not much at first, but later on

his demands became outrageous.”

“It’s the old method,” Coyle observed. “First, make it light until you get used to it and realize how deep you’re in the mess, and then the real pressure. Mr. Barnard, the solution to your problem isn’t too difficult. Show me this blackmailer and I’ll show you a coward who’ll wilt when I tell him a few things.”

Barnard finished his highball in two gulps, arose and summoned Coyle to follow him. He led the way to the study at the rear of the great house. The door was closed. He opened it and stepped in. So did Coyle.

A man of about forty, bald-headed, dapper and thin-faced, occupied a chair facing the philanthropist’s desk. In the dim light Coyle couldn’t make him out too well. He took a couple of steps toward the man, then Barnard turned on the light.

The first thing Coyle spotted was the nickel-plated revolver lying at the man’s feet. He raised his eyes slowly, starting with the man’s ankles, traveling up the legs, the torso—then he saw the dark stain above the heart. He let his eyes rest on the man’s face for a moment. It was chalky with death.

“Oh!” Coyle gasped. “It—won’t be so—easy after—all.”

Barnard walked around the desk and sat down. He looked at the corpse quite impassively.

“He came here with a fresh demand tonight. At nine o’clock on the dot. By appointment. He was especially nasty too. We had a few words. Then there was a shot. I think it came through that open window behind me. It’s about the only place the murderer. . . Jack, did you think I killed this man?”

Coyle nodded miserably. “Yes, sir, I did. I’m sorry.”

Barnard’s lips twitched. “Well, I can hardly blame you. But I didn’t kill him. As

I stated, the shot came through that window. This blackmailer knew it was coming. He tried to go for a gun under his coat. He didn’t succeed in even touching it. Naturally, I tried to find out who did it. I hurried into the hallway, through the house and out the back door. Meanwhile, the killer apparently climbed through the window, dropped the gun on the floor and fled through the front door while I was prowling around in back, like the doddering old fool I’m getting to be.”

Coyle bent down and studied the gun without touching it. “No,” he said, “you weren’t foolish. Anyone would have done the same thing. This gun?”

“Mine.” Barnard shrugged. “I kept it in this desk. The murderer stole it, I suppose. Jack, do you really believe me?”

COYLE straightened and turned to face the old man.

“Of course, I do, sir.”

“Thank you. I feared you wouldn’t believe me because all things point toward me as the murderer. How are we going to get out of this, without exposing me?”

“I—don’t know, sir. I need time to think. Let me look this man over.”

Coyle searched the corpse. He found an expensive wallet, fattened with bills, the usual knickknacks a man carries and, in a shoulder holster, an expensive blue-black automatic pistol. He pulled this out and automatically sniffed of the muzzle. The gun needed cleaning. It had been fired.

Coyle carried it over to a chair and idly stuffed it down beside the cushions. He chewed on his lower lip a moment.

“There is only one way, sir,” he finally said. “We’ve got to get rid of this corpse. Let it be found somewhere else. Then you won’t be involved.”

“Isn’t an act like that rather contrary to your oath of office as an Assistant District

Attorney, Jack?" asked Barnard.

Coyle smiled. "It does violate that oath a bit. In fact, it shatters it into a million pieces. But I'll do it anyway."

"I thought of that scheme a little while back," Barnard said. "Right after I phoned you, in fact. I tried to call back and prevent you from coming here. I knew then I shouldn't have called you at all. I telephoned Ben Ritchie and told him the circumstances. He is sending out some—ah—aides."

"All right," Coyle said. "I'll do a vanishing act until they are gone. But later I must try to find out who killed this man."

"I wish I had some idea," Barnard sighed. "In fact, sometimes I wonder if the bullet wasn't really meant for me."

"No," Coyle told him quickly. "You said this blackmailer went for his gun. He recognized the person who fired that shot and I have a theory. Did you pay him anything tonight?"

Barnard opened the desk drawer and took out a fat wad of bills. "I never had a chance, Jack."

"Good. The blackmailer is well-heeled. His sort rarely keep money for long. So we can assume he was a professional. That he had other victims. One of them could have followed him here and meted out a little justice. . . Well, I'd better get my car away from this vicinity, sir. I'd rather Ritchie's boys didn't know I'd been here."

Barnard closed the study door behind them.

"Thanks again, Jack," he said. "For what little I may have done for you, you have repaid me many times by your faith. Will you be back soon?"

"Very soon, sir. Don't worry about things and don't tell Ritchie's men a word. They're not apt to ask questions anyhow. Ritchie used to be the toughest gang leader

in the business and while he has put on a stiff shirt and tails, he hasn't changed except on the exterior."

Coyle hurried down the dark path toward the street. His brain was swimming madly. No matter what the consequences might be, he knew he would stick by Barnard. But with all this, Ben Ritchie was acquiring a strangle-hold on the old man. To offset it, Coyle knew he would have to find the actual murderer.

His car was at the curb. He opened the door and stiffened. There was a man behind the wheel and another in the back seat. Both had guns carelessly pointed in Coyle's direction.

"Get in, Coyle," the one in back said. "No arguments. We're not looking for trouble, but we pack an awful lot of dumb clucks who don't do as we say."

"Ritchie?" Coyle asked.

"Use your own judgment, pal. And don't ask questions. Are you going to be good?"

"Very, very good." Coyle climbed into the car. "In fact, if I had a gun—" He stopped. He did have a gun. The blackmailer's! Only it was still stuffed down in that chair. He grinned. "If I had a gun, boys, I'd do my best to make you take me to see Ritchie. For once, the D.A.'s office and the state's biggest hot shot, have something in common. Let's go."

Both men put their guns away. The man in the back seat smiled thinly.

"That's better," he mumbled. "Ritchie ain't such a bad sort when you get to know him."

The rest of the ride was in strict silence. Ritchie's massive, ornate and so-called "Inn" was well out of town. He took no chances on interference by city authorities. The car swung into the drive and stopped at the parking station. It was jammed with other cars.

“Boys,” Coyle said, “if you don’t mind, can we use a rear entrance? After all, I am in the D.A.’s office.”

“Sure.” One of the men laughed. “We know how it is. Come on.”

JACK COYLE was led to a small, narrow door. It opened mysteriously as they stepped up to it. Coyle saw dark, steep stairs. He went up them. One of the men with him tapped on a door. His knuckles drew a metallic ring. The door was steel.

Concealed in the wall somewhere was a speaker. Ritchie’s voice came through it. “Coyle!” one of the men said, and the door mechanism clicked.

It opened by itself and Coyle walked in. On the threshold he was stopped and searched. He was glad then that he didn’t have the gun the blackmailer had carried.

Ritchie arose and extended a hand.

“Glad to see you, Coyle. The old man is our mutual friend. We’ve got to help him. Frankly, I was a little scared of what you might do.”

Coyle accepted a Havana from a mahogany humidor and settled himself comfortably amidst the cloud of fragrant smoke.

“Whatever I am,” he said, “I owe to Barnard. Did you send trustworthy men to—ah—handle the situation there?”

Ritchie was as massive as his desk. He had jowls, a couple of chins, and a hard, polished smoothness that didn’t quite fit him. Except for the hardness. His hands were small and pudgy. They had killed several men, Coyle knew. It seemed odd, sitting here, enjoying his hospitality and talking about disposing of the corpse of a murdered man.

Ritchie smirked. “The job will be well handled. Tell me, did the old boy rear up and plug that punk?”

“I’m sure he didn’t,” Coyle said

positively. “So are you, Ritchie. Know anything about it?”

Ritchie shrugged. “Only what the old boy told me over the phone. Maybe some of my boys will know the punk who got killed. Leave it to me. Now listen—the body will be found someplace. After that, it’s up to you. I don’t want no army of cops on me and my place. Understand?”

Coyle nodded. “Yes. It’s a truce for the moment. Some day, perhaps, I’ll knock off this place. It isn’t within my jurisdiction, but I’ll find a way.”

Ritchie’s portly midriff moved up and down. “Any time you like to try, it’s okay with me,” he said casually. “Only sometimes people get hurt. There’s a million bucks tied up in this place, my friend. I’m not seeing it snatched from me or busted with a riot squad’s axes.”

Coyle arose. “We understand one another, at any rate. Thanks for the cigar. Thanks for helping Mr. Barnard.”

Ritchie proffered his fat hand. “Okay, pal. Any time you like to pay us a friendly visit, everything is on the house. Just look me up.”

Coyle went out of the office and found his escort waiting. They led him to the parking space where his car had been placed. He waved to them and drove away. Back to Barnard’s house.

The corpse had been removed. There was nothing to show that a man had died there recently and Barnard was vastly relieved. Coyle remembered the gun and fetched it.

“I just thought we might trace that blackmailer with it, sir. It would be handy to know just who he was.”

“Why not let the whole thing drop, Jack?” asked Barnard. “The man deserved to be killed. As for myself, I’m severing all connections with Ritchie and his gambling place. One of his lieutenants told me that Ritchie was now in a position to

buy me out and that I should contact him later.”

“Good, sir,” commended the District Attorney’s assistant. “I wanted to suggest that. You see, Ritchie has been getting out of hand lately. Becoming a bit too pompous, and I know a grand jury is already secretly issuing indictments against people Ritchie has bribed for protection. That means the place will be knocked over soon. And thoroughly. Get out while you can.”

Barnard sighed. “I’ll probably lose part of my investment, but I can’t expect too much. My profits were large, even if they were blackmailed away from me to a great extent. I’ll never forget what you have done.”

Coyle drove away from the house, stopped on a quiet street and lit a cigarette. He wanted to think. At no time had he even suspected that Barnard might have killed that man. He doubted it now. Barnard simply wasn’t the type.

But who, then, had done it and tried to pin the blame on Barnard? To push that tottering idol off his pedestal? That person would probably know of Barnard’s connection with Ritchie.

**P**OSSIBLY he had overheard the blackmailer make his demands. If so, Barnard wasn’t out of it yet. In fact, now that the corpse had been removed, he was in deeper than ever.

Coyle suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. He was in it pretty deep himself. It was absolutely essential that he find out who the murderer was.

He proceeded to Police Headquarters and turned the automatic over to an identification expert.

“It’s in connection with a case,” he explained. “Just check it. Never mind fingerprints. See if you can find out who owned it.”

Coyle was called into a detective captain’s office then, where an important case was discussed for more than half an hour. They were still engrossed in it when the identification expert burst into the room.

“That gun!” he exclaimed. “The numbers were filed off so we began to wonder about it. Ballistics fired a slug and it matched up with the bullet that killed Fred Irwin last week.”

Coyle did his best to conceal any emotion. He merely nodded.

“Thanks,” he said. “I expected something like that. Hold the gun, will you?”

The detective captain was frowning. “How’d you get a line on the Fred Irwin kill, Jack? We didn’t think it had hit the D.A.’s office at all yet. In fact, we were getting no place with it.”

“The D.A.’s office,”—Coyle grinned—“is sometimes a jump ahead of the police. But not too often, Captain. Tell me all you know of the Irwin job.”

“In one minute flat. Fred Irwin, a wealthy retired man and very well-respected in town, was shot through the head last Tuesday. A week ago. A servant found him lying in his living room. Irwin had given all his servants the night off—a habit he had carried on for three or four years. They never knew when he would tell them to take the station wagon and go to a movie or something. Looks as if Irwin wanted the house all to himself on those certain nights, because he even sent his wife away too.”

“No clues or motive of any kind?” asked Coyle.

“Not an iota. He never had an enemy in his life. In fact, a better man probably never lived. After he retired six years ago, he spent all his time doing church work and charity stuff.”

“Um,” Coyle mused. “How did his

estate turn out?"

"Not too good. About a tenth of what he'd been expected to leave, but then he had given most of it away, I guess. Listen, Jack, if you have a line on the killer, give me first crack at him."

"As soon as I know, I'll do that," Coyle promised. "Anything new in the homicide field tonight?"

The captain shrugged. "We don't have many dull moments, thanks to human nature. They just brought in a sti—a body that was found lying under a park bench. The boys are working on it at the morgue right now. A murder. The fellow had been plugged through the heart. Nothing of much interest. He looked like a hoodlum."

Coyle headed for the door.

"I think I'll look him over anyhow, Captain. Take good care of that gun."

Coyle drove to the morgue. In a small receiving room lay the body of the blackmailer. They had extracted the bullet and it nestled on a plug of cotton. The dead man's clothes were thrown on a nearby table.

"Any identification?" Coyle asked the homicide sergeant in charge.

"Not on him, Jack. He had been pretty methodically stripped of everything, but we know who he is. Marty Devlin, a cheap little punk. Used to be an errand boy for the big shots in his day. Lately, he must have hit a sweet racket, because he was living high."

"How high?"

"Well, he had been seen playing the wheels at Ritchie's gambling place across the city line. Dropping heavy too, and it takes a lot of cash to do that."

Coyle returned to Headquarters and obtained a photo of Devlin and his last known address. It was a cheap place for a man rolling in money as Devlin seemed to have been doing.

Arrived there, Coyle persuaded the

landlady to unlock the door. Devlin's quarters were none too clean. Within three minutes Coyle got the idea that Devlin was all front so far as prosperity was concerned. He had few clothes, none of the jewelry for which all his type went in heavily but, well-hidden, Coyle stumbled upon a bank-book made out in the name of Dakin. It showed deposits of fairly large sums made regularly. The sum total was a nice little nest egg.

Coyle proceeded to search in earnest then, but the only other things he found of any interest were a score of blue chips, the kind used in gambling places. These were embossed with a crest of some kind. He put them into his pocket.

THE landlady came in with a slip of paper.

"I don't know what it's all about, but I don't fight police," she said. "A phone call, about two hours ago, came for Mr. Devlin. He was to call this number back."

"Good," Coyle said, and took the slip of paper.

"Ain't the first time this same party called," she went on. "About once a month I got the same message."

Coyle left the boarding house, located a telephone booth nearby and promptly dialed the number. A pompous voice answered.

"The residence of Mr. Miller. Who is calling, please?"

"This is Joe," Coyle said. "Is Uncle Horace there?"

"Uncle Horace? This is the residence of Mr. Roy Miller at One-nineteen Park Heights. We have no Uncle Horace here."

Coyle mumbled something about a wrong number and hung up with a grin. He was turning into a pretty good detective. He reviewed the case in his mind for a moment, and realized he knew little about the murder of Fred Irwin. He

did have a notation of the address and went to see Irwin's widow.

"The case has just been placed in my hands," Coyle explained. "I know little about it. Perhaps you can help me. Your husband had no enemies?"

"Absolutely none that I ever heard of," she declared.

"I'm going to get very personal now, Mrs. Irwin," Coyle said. "Remember, this is no reflection upon the character of your husband in any way. Was he being blackmailed?"

Her patrician head rose high. "Good heavens, what an absurd question!"

Coyle smiled, to ease off the sting of that question. He took the rogue's gallery photo of Devlin from his pocket and laid it on the table before Mrs. Irwin.

"Take a careful look at that face. Did you ever see it before?"

Coyle hadn't expected a quick break like this. Mrs. Irwin looked twice, then up at Coyle.

"I remember this man," she told him. "He came to see my husband about four years ago. I remember opening the door. He was extremely arrogant. After he departed, my husband refused, for the first time in our married lifetime, to tell me anything about that horrid man's business with him. I had forgotten the incident. I never saw the man again."

Coyle did no explaining for her benefit, but took his departure. It was late now, and he gave up for the night, but in the morning he did some thorough investigating in various banks. After that, he locked himself in his office for several hours and thought until his head reeled.

That night, at eleven, he pulled up at Ritchie's busy Inn. He entered, evaded the bustling headwaiters and managed to reach the gambling rooms without attracting any attention. He made as certain as possible

that neither of the two mugs who had escorted him here yesterday were at hand.

Coyle bought some blue chips, stepped to a roulette table and started playing. He won a moderate amount. Then he dipped a hand into his pocket and took out a couple of the blue chips he had found in Devlin's room. He compared these with the ones Ritchie furnished and his heart sank. They were utterly different. Ritchie's chips had the mask of a laughing man engraved on them.

Coyle threw one of Devlin's chips on the red. The gambler behind the wheel looked up suddenly and on his usually frozen face there seemed to be a flicker of surprise. Coyle lost that chip. He used up five more and lost them all. He drifted to another table. With Ritchie's chips he could win. With Devlin's it was impossible, and each time a gambler spotted Devlin's chips, he seemed surprised.

Coyle watched the gambler at the last wheel when he played one of those bad luck chips. He saw the man's hand move surreptitiously beneath the edge of the table.

A man in tuxedo, who had made too many visits to the bar, stumbled against Coyle and excused himself volubly. Coyle had an idea. He took the man aside.

"I think this place is crooked, my friend," he said confidentially. "Look here—help me find out. Then we can both stop playing if we prove it. Before they really take us."

The drunk was more than willing.

"Listen, pal," he said solemnly, "if the joint is crooked, I'll rip it apart. I'll fix 'em. Just show me is all. My brother-in-law is a lieutenant on the State Police. I'll fix 'em. Anything I hate is a crooked gambling house."

COYLE pressed five of Devlin's chips into the palm of the drunk's hand and told him to watch the dealer closely. The drunk promptly lost all the chips. Once again, the professional gambler at the wheel seemed actually startled at finding someone else with those chips.

The drunk weaved back to Coyle. "The wheels are rigged," he complained. "Oh my gosh, all the dough I've dropped here! Listen—I'm leaving, but I'll be back. Yes, sir, I'll be back."

"Make it soon," Coyle urged, "and bring that brother-in-law with you."

Coyle watched him reclaim his hat and coat from the check-room and waddle out the front door. Then Coyle summoned one of the head waiters.

"My name is Coyle," he explained. "I want to see Ritchie. I know it's probably against the rules, but this happens to be important. Will you phone him or send word about me?"

The headwaiter bowed slightly. "I am sure that Mr. Ritchie is not here, sir. But if you will wait in this room, please, I shall try to find out."

Coyle was escorted to what seemed to be a neat little sitting room and quite private. He remained there about ten minutes. This time it wasn't the fawning headwaiter who appeared, but one of the two mugs who had brought Coyle here in the first place.

"Oh!" he said. "It's really you, eh? The boss sent me down to make sure. Follow me."

Coyle was taken by a different route in reaching the upper floors of the place this time, but he was escorted to that same steel door. The man with him promptly searched him. He found the house chips, and grinned.

"Been taking a gander at the wheels? Tch, tch. I thought D.A.'s never gambled. You should of told the boss you were here

and he'd have fixed it so you'd make a little profit. Boy!"

His hand dipped into Coyle's other pocket and found Devlin's chips. Coyle heard him give a slight hissing intake of breath.

"Boy," the mug repeated, not quite as pleasantly, "you were sure playing tonight. Okay, you can go in. And no funny business, That's a rod pushed up against your back, smart egg. Go ahead—walk right in. The boss is expecting you, but not the news I got for him."

Coyle was warmly greeted by the gross gambling house owner. The assistant D.A. sat down, and his escort went behind the desk, whispered in Ritchie's ear and showed him the blue chips which could never win at any of the gambling tables.

Ritchie's features never changed. He sent the man away, leaned back, and clasped his hands almost piously.

"And now, my friend, did you come here for pleasure—or is it business?"

Coyle smiled. "I had a little fun losing some money. Actually though, I came to discuss with you Mr. Barnard's share in this establishment. A hundred and fifty thousand dollars, I think it amounted to. He mentioned that you were in a position to make a deal."

"I am. Not for a hundred and fifty grand though. Because I'm getting leery. Things have been too easy lately. Like a lull before the cops bust in. I'll settle for a third of that figure. Barnard ought to get out anyhow. He can't afford to be tied up with a place of this kind."

"I'm certain he will accept. As his attorney, you can consider that official."

Ritchie opened a desk drawer and took out a check-book. His pen scratched steadily for a moment. He tore off a check. It was for fifty thousand dollars and made out to Jack Coyle.

Coyle put it in his pocket and arose.

"I think that about concludes our business, Ritchie," he said.

"Not quite," Ritchie said. "Sit down again and tell me where you got those blue chips you used playing the tables tonight. The cashier didn't sell them to you."

"Quite right," Coyle said. "I found them hidden in Marty Devlin's room. They're some chips, Ritchie. You can't win with them. I imagine Devlin came here, bought a big stack and paid for them in cash. Money he had obtained as a blackmailer. He promptly lost the chips because your gamblers have orders never to let those special chips win. That was how Devlin paid you without making any direct contact. Devlin worked for you, didn't he?"

Ritchie laughed. "I had an idea you were pretty smart."

Coyle leaned forward, opened Ritchie's box of cigars and took one out. He removed the cellophane, rolled it carelessly and looked for a place to put it. He saw no basket so he dropped the paper into his coat pocket. He fussed with the cigar a moment, finally put it between his teeth and, as he spoke, he slowly chewed on it.

"You, though," he observed to Ritchie, "are not so smart. Devlin took a certain amount from his blackmail victims. What you didn't know was that he had been raising the ante for months, keeping the difference in a savings account under a phony name and living strictly on the cut you allowed him to keep."

**R**ITCHIE nodded. "I suspected him, but I had no proof. What happens now? Do I get smacked down?"

"I don't know," Coyle said. "This place isn't within my jurisdiction, but I wouldn't be surprised. And just in case something does happen, I'd better be on my way."

Ritchie wagged his massive head. "No—stay where you are. You can't get out. You see, I already know the State cops are on their way. Somebody tipped them. I've got a man working at the barracks. Now I know it wasn't you because the call came from outside while you were in here. But you'll have to stay."

"Why?"

"Because you know too much. I'm not sure just how much, but I imagine it's just about the works." Ritchie lifted a newspaper lying on his desk. There was a gun beneath it. Ritchie picked it up and leveled it on Coyle. "So you stay to meet the cops when they arrive. You won't tell them a thing except you're my lawyer. The D.A. can accept cases outside the jurisdiction of his office."

"Suppose I tell them the truth?" Coyle said.

"That check is made out to you. I'll say it was hush money. If you insist it belongs to Barnard, they'll laugh at you. He can't afford to talk and even if he does, they'll think he's covering up for you. When the cops arrive, I want one thing. You will tell them that except for running a gambling house, I'm on the level. You'll see that they don't smash the place to bits and that I'm let out with a fine and can come back and keep my place going. Is that clear? You'll commit yourself right in front of the cops. Otherwise, I'll tell them about the check. Don't try to reach for it. I'll shoot if you do."

Coyle was rolling the cigar around in his mouth furiously. He kept both hands on the arms of the chair he occupied and was still sitting like that when the police banged on the door. Ritchie put the gun away, pressed a button, and the door opened.

Coyle knew some of the State Police who entered. They exhibited their profound surprise. Ritchie was grinning as

he spoke.

“Attorney Coyle is my lawyer, boys. Talk to him, not to me.”

“I beg your pardon,” Coyle said. “I’m here in my capacity as Assistant District Attorney. I came to arrest Ritchie for the murder of a man named Marty Devlin, Sergeant, put your handcuffs on this man and hold him for me. That’s official.”

Ritchie let out a howl. “This lug’s crooked! He came here to bleed me. He said he had something on me, but he didn’t say what. I paid him fifty grand. He’s got the check on him. I demand that you search him and prove it.”

Coyle raised his hands. “Sergeant, will you do the honors? Ritchie is crazy, but just for the record, let’s gratify his demands.”

Coyle was carefully searched, without results. The sergeant turned to Ritchie.

“Man, you’re getting balmy in your old age. Come on, Ritchie, we’re going places. Boys, go to work on this joint and do a good job. The lieutenant’s brother-in-law came here tonight and determined that the place was crooked. All we needed was a complaint to take action. Well, take it.”

Ritchie, his little eyes bulging from their layers of fat, started scurrying around on the floor, looking for the check. He was frantic now. The one word “murder” still rang in his ears. Nobody stopped him, but he was being watched. It was Coyle’s fault, all this trouble. Ritchie was burning inside. He went around to the back of his desk. The drawer into which he had put the gun, was open a bit. The gun glistened enticingly and there were no cops close by.

Coyle, Ritchie thought, knew too much. The check was some place around. If he plugged Coyle and later on the check was found, he could maintain he had gone crazy with rage at a man who had just held him up for fifty thousand and then

doublecrossed him. Clever lawyers could make a lot of this and if Coyle were dead he, Ritchie, would never hang for the Devlin kill . . .

Ritchie scooped up the gun, raised it—and died. He had forgotten that part of a State trooper’s training is in the science of drawing a gun fast. The sergeant clucked his tongue sympathetically.

“My, my, he sure wasn’t the old Ritchie. I’m sorry, Mr. Coyle. I’d rather have seen him burn than go out easy like he did.”

“It’s all right,” Coyle said with a gulp. “This is your party from now on, boys.”

COYLE drove to Barnard’s house. He was still shaking a bit. Coyle knew what Ritchie had intended to do with that gun.

Barnard realized something had happened. He provided a stiff drink.

“It’s clear enough now, sir,” Coyle said. “Ritchie is dead, so you won’t have to worry again, but I’m afraid you’re out that money you invested. So are two other people. You see, Ritchie sold you a half interest in his place and he also sold a half interest in it to two other men who couldn’t talk either. Transactions of this kind are never recorded. You couldn’t collect, but to keep you quiet Ritchie paid off handsomely and then sent his man Devlin around to get the money back by blackmail. One of the victims refused to pay any more. Devlin shot him. That did it. Ritchie was afraid the whole thing would break open so he had Devlin killed while he sat in this house, wheedling more money out of you.”

Barnard passed a hand over his eyes. “I was a fool, Jack. I don’t care about the loss of that money. I was afraid Ritchie might—well, do something to you.”

Coyle chuckled. “He tried. He gave me a check for fifty thousand in settlement of

your claims. Then the police came in response to a complaint from a man I urged to file charges. Ritchie promptly said he would claim the check was hush money paid me as assistant D.A. to keep quiet. I had fifty thousand dollars of your

money for a few moments. I still have it—in my stomach. I ate the darn thing, popping it into my mouth and chewing it with a cigar for a prop. May I have another drink? The check didn't taste so good.”