

He knew the perfume of murder; he knew the caress of death. But that wasn't enough! How did a lovely girl help solve the mystery?



"Okay, baby," he grunted.
"Don't move!"



By ARTHUR WALLACE

SCENT of the KILLER

"ALL right, Collins! Stick 'em up!" A feminine voice broke hard and business-like behind the private detective's back. He hesitated momentarily.

"Lift 'em!"

Collins obeyed the second command. His arms came above his head. He heard the scrape of feet and the next moment a gun barrel bored into his spine.

"Don't move or I'll plug you," the voice cautioned. Collins breathed deeply and caught a whiff of pungent perfume. He felt his hips being patted and a hand creeping into his jacket pocket and removing his automatic. Then it crawled around in front of him, frisking rapidly. There was no mistaking the pressure of taut flesh against his shoulder-blades nor the warmth of tensed thighs against his loins. Whoever was doing the very effective job of rendering him *hors de combat* had more than one weapon at her command.

He wriggled slightly to get the full imprint of the girl's breasts on his back. A vagrant thought amused him. If you took fingerprints, why couldn't you take breast-prints? Or were all feminine bosoms pretty much alike? Not from his experience!

The warmth and the twin bulges departed as the girl stepped back. "O. K., Collins, just stay put!" she instructed. "If you hear a shot, don't make a break or the next one might ease you into the grave!"

The detective watched the entrance of the *Belvedere Arms*. At any moment Roland Talbot, the millionaire financier, would step from beneath the portico and into his waiting limousine. He—Collins—was supposed to be guarding Talbot. Hell of a way to guard anyone, he thought. Paws up in the air and a gun-girl two feet behind him!

Where was the doorman at the *Belvedere*? Why was the damned street so deserted at eight o'clock in the evening? He

felt decidedly silly; like playing a game of cops and robbers.

But suddenly the silliness vanished. Roland Talbot came out of the apartment house lobby and paused for a moment beneath the canopy, adjusting his suede gloves. As he stepped to the car, a shot rang out. He stopped, hung like a marionette suspended from a loose string, and crumpled to the sidewalk.

Collins dropped his arms and wheeled. Something leaped at him from the shadow of the building. He tried to ward off the impending blow, but it smashed down on his head with a bone-splitting thud.

He reeled drunkenly. It seemed as though the entire brick wall of the building was toppling down on him. He heard a low, throaty laugh, smelled the perfume again, then all was pitch-black silence.

MILLIONS of tiny hammers were beating on the sensitive tissue of his brain. Collins raised one hand and made as though to brush them away.

“Feel any better?” a voice queried.

The detective opened his eyes and grinned up into the florid face of Ace Farnell, head man at the *Ace Detective Agency*.

“Better than what? Ooww! What a head!”

“You got a nasty crack, Dan—Looks like a billy smash.”

Collins made a wry face. “Felt like a ton of iron.” He dug his fingers into his scalp to ease the pain. “What—what happened to Talbot?”

“Dead!” A newspaper rustled in Farnell’s hands. “You’ve been out four hours. There’s an extra on it already.”

“Yeah, he was a big guy.”

“Not only that,” Farnell countered. “Read these headlines.” He held the paper at Collins’ eye-level. A ninety point streamer head, black as sin, crossed the front page:

TALBOT FINANCE COMPANY
COLLAPSES.

A whistle of breath escaped the detective’s lips. “Geez! A ten million buck failure!” He sat up, swung his feet to the floor. “There’s a dame behind all this, Ace. She frisked me and killed Talbot!”

“Would you know her if you saw her?”

“No, but I’d know her if I felt her ... or smelled her perfume.” His hands indicated lush feminine breasts. She was hard as a rock up here and she whiffed like springtime in a peach orchard. The ringing of the phone interrupted his description. Farnell answered it.

“Yes, this is Mr. Farnell. Who? Miss Talbot?” He nodded to Collins. “Well, it’s rather late, Miss Talbot, but—” He held his hand over the mouthpiece, addressed Dan. “She wants to come down immediately. It’s Talbot’s daughter.”

Dan’s eyes narrowed. “Okay. We might as well get the dope while it’s hot.”

Farnell returned to the phone. “All right, Miss Talbot, we’ll wait for you.”

It seemed like bare minutes, but it was a full half hour, when a knock sounded on the door of the outer office. Farnell answered the summons, admitting a tall, slender girl attired in brown tweeds, severely cut. There was nothing dainty about her, and yet concrete evidences of femininity punctured the white silk of her blouse. Whiskey-colored hair peeped from beneath a mannish cloque, framing a strong face dominated by piercing hazel eyes.

SHE followed Farnell into his private office, acknowledged the introduction to Dan Collins with a curt nod. Then, she spoke:

“As I am given to understand, Mr. Farnell, my father engaged your agency following the receipt of threatening letters.”

Ace nodded. “Yes, Miss Talbot. Mr.

Collins was assigned to the case.”

She shot Dan an accusing look. Her eyes were dry, but peculiarly translucent. “From the results,” she snapped, “you seem to have wasted your time.”

Farnell hastened to right matters. “I think you’re being unkind, Miss Talbot. We appreciate your loss and realize that it reflects upon us, but we intend to make amends as best we can.”

“Amends?” Her voice sneered. “My father is dead and you speak of amends! Have you the letters he received? There were five of them all told. I’d like to see them. I have my own ideas as to the source.”

Farnell moved to a filing cabinet. Dan Collins kept his eyes glued to the girl’s face. It was without grief, but stolid and set. He had the feeling that her lips lacked rouge and her cheeks suffered from the failure to apply powder. Studying her, she seemed out of character in her tweed suit and flat-heeled shoes.

He tried to form a mental picture of her in negligee, something distinctly feminine. She would be stunning. Her body was lithe and delicately curved. Her breasts were taut.

Farnell dropped a packet of letters on the desk. “These are the communications, Miss Talbot. The numbers on the envelopes indicate the order of receipt.”

She reached for the packet, slipped the rubber band. Her gloved fingers removed a letter from its envelope. Her eyes scanned it hurriedly, then she looked up. “You’ve never discovered who wrote these letters, have you?” she queried.

“No.” Ace Farnell’s voice was apologetic. “We’ve been working on it but haven’t anything to show yet.”

A pitifully contemptuous smile—a smile that was almost tinged with grief—curled her pale lips. “It’s a little late now, isn’t it? The damage has already been done. Somehow, you don’t seem to realize that—

that my—my father is dead.” Her eyes dampened as she fumbled with the catch of her bag. A white handkerchief flashed in her hand and fluttered from inert fingers to the floor.



BOTH Dan and Ace stooped for it. The next moment her voice broke, hard and steely. “Stay where you are! Both of you!” The men shot erect to look into the snub nose of a pearl-butted revolver. Her left hand shot out and swept the blackmailing letters from the desk top into her bag. It clicked shut.

The calm, stony iciness of her face was in distinct contrast to the visible emotion of her body. Beneath the shirred bodice, twin breasts rose and fell in the rhythm of her rapid breathing. She backed to the door. “Don’t try to follow me,” she warned. “I’m not alone.”

Her left hand reached behind her, found the doorknob and twisted it. “If you’re smart, neither of you will leave this room for at least five minutes.” Her smile was taunting. “I’d hate to see two such marvelous detectives dead!”

She was gone in a flash. The outer door slammed just as Dan Collins leaped to his feet.

“Come on!” he cried. “After her!”

Evidently the one night elevator had been held on the floor for her. It slid down just as the two men ran into the hall.

Collins swore. In the excitement, he had forgotten his splitting head. He made for a red exit light at the end of the hall. "We'll take the stairs! Maybe we can head her off!"

Breathless, they reached the street just as a taxicab pulled away from the curb and roared into the night. Farnell's runabout was parked outside the building. He slid behind the wheel, turned the ignition key and stepped on the starter, all in one motion.

Dan piled in beside him as the cat leaped forward. Far ahead, the tail-light of the cab was blinking into oblivion.

Farnell gave the low-slung car all it would stand. The motor hummed smoothly and the tires sang a tune of speed over the asphalt. Forty ... fifty ... fifty-five ... sixty ... sixty-five ... sixty-seven . . . sixty-eight. . . . The red speedometer needle quivered at the seventy mark, passed it.

Wind screeched against the body. A milk-wagon horse shied and snorted madly as the car whizzed by. They seemed to be gaining on the taxicab. Its rear light grew larger and easier to follow.

Dan shouted above the roar of the motor. "Got a gun, Ace?"

"In my pocket!"

The detective groped for the weapon, found it. He broke it, twirled the magazine. The brass caps of soft-nosed .44's were comforting to see.

Farnell hunched over the wheel, his eyes glued to the stretch of road ahead. The cab was heading out of the city, in the direction of the Crown Heights section, an exclusive residential development. The tail-light ahead suddenly swung like a lantern and melted into the night.

"He turned off," Dan yelled. "The third block."

Without slowing down, the runabout

took the corner on two wheels, scorched rubber whining out a weird protest. They could see the cab making another turn. Dan shot his arm out the window and wasted a bullet. The gun boomed into the night.

Again the car spun like a top as it whizzed around the second corner. Mansions loomed on either side of the street. They were set back from the sidewalk and surrounded with landscaped gardens.

The cab seemed to have stopped at the end of the street. Farnell stepped on the gas, jamming the accelerator down to the floor. He drew up beside the taxi, swung the front wheels in its path. Dan leaped out and hopped on the running-board. His gun-hand jerked into the open window.

"All right, sister, come on out!" he barked.

There was no answer except a perplexed grunt from the cabbie. Dan found the light switch, snapped it. The back of the taxi was empty!

He shoved the gun into the amazed driver's face. "Where's the jane that rode with you from the Slater Building?"

"Jane? Nobody rode wit' me, mister. A goil give me a sawbuck an' tole me to drive like hell out to the end of Crown Heights. She said dat a car would foller me. I guess you must be the guys she meant, huh?"

Dan slumped. "Yeah, we're the 'guys,' all right." He turned to Farnell. "She gave us the slip."

THE sumptuous reception room of the Talbot Finance Company was a milling mass of people when Dan Collins elbowed his way to the information desk the following morning. Investors who had lost heavily in the crash of the company shot screaming questions at the poor harassed information clerk. "The auditors are now in charge," the girl's voice monotonously repeated over and over again. "I'm sorry there's nothing I can do for you."

Dan squeezed a word in edgewise. "Mr. Vastro in?"

"Mr. Vastro is seeing no one today," she replied. "You'll have to put your claim in writing and leave it with me."

"This isn't a claim, girlie. I'm from the Ace Detective Agency. You tell Mr. Vastro I'm here and he'll see me."

The girl murmured an apology and dipped behind her grilled cage. Seconds later she bobbed up again. "Your name, please?"

"Dan Collins."

She repeated the name into the switchboard phone, nodded assent to the reply. "All right, Mr. Collins. You can go in. Mr. Vastro is in the third office to the left."

Warner Vastro, treasurer of the defunct Finance Company, rose as Dan entered his office. He extended a damp hand across the desk. "I'm glad you dropped in, Mr. Collins," he said. "This whole thing is terrible." He withdrew his right hand and passed it nervously over the pale elderliness of his face.

He looked like a man who had gone through ten years of life in an hour. He was completely broken. "I suppose," he suggested timorously, "you wish to ask me some questions." He indicated a chair. "Please be seated, Mr. Collins."

Dan launched into the matter without preamble. "Did you know, Mr. Vastro, that Talbot was using the firm's funds for other purposes?"

Vastro hesitated. "Yes—yes, I knew, Mr. Collins, but nobody else did. Roland was a friend of long standing. I tried to fix things up for him, to cover it as long as I could. I spoke to him about it again and again, but it was useless. I wanted to help him get out of the hole he had gotten himself into. But he wouldn't listen." His voice dropped to a hushed whisper. "Then, of course, there was Mimi, you know—"

Dan broke in. "Who's Mimi?"

"Miriam Talbot, Roland's daughter."

Dan stiffened. "You know her, of course."

"Not only do I know her, Mr. Collins, but we had planned soon to marry. Of course, this hideous thing will naturally act as a temporary barrier. But, as I was saying, I wanted to help Talbot more for Mimi's sake than anyone else's. Ever since the death of his wife, Roland has been throwing himself away on cheap women and gambling. I wouldn't be a bit surprised—"

"You know about the letters Talbot received," Dan interspersed.

There was no recognition in Vastro's eyes. "Letters? No, what letters?"

"Well, that's how we happen to be in on the case, Mr. Vastro," Dan explained. "Talbot received five threatening letters, one after the other. They were evidently written by a woman who desired money. If we can find this woman—" He broke off abruptly. "Where is Miriam Talbot now, Mr. Vastro?"

"At the Belvedere, but I don't think she can be questioned now. She's terribly upset."

Dan rose. "You don't happen to know the names and addresses of any of the women Talbot played around with, do you, Mr. Vastro?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't. You know, my one interest was Mimi. Then Roland was very secretive about his affairs. Innately, he felt that he was doing the wrong thing, so he never confided in anyone."

Dan paused at the door. "The collapse of the company is complete, Mr. Vastro?"

Vastro nodded slowly, his eyes dimming. "I'm afraid so. Of course, I shall make every effort to see that the holders of obligations do not suffer. It is all I can do."

DAN COLLINS grimaced as he passed under the portico of the Belvedere Arms. Still fresh in his mind was the experience of the previous night. He picked out the very spot where he

had stood. And memory brought back the odor of perfume and the rigid contact of young breasts. The daring girl who had held them at bay in the Ace Agency office and stolen the blackmailing letters might have owned those breasts.

Dan walked into the ornate lobby, entered the waiting elevator. "The Talbot apartment," he said.

The elevator operator hesitated. "I'm sorry, sir, you'll have to ring them first."

Dan flashed a badge. "I don't think I will," he replied.

The velvet rug on the corridor floor of the Belvedere Arms had pile an inch thick. Everything in the place shouted of lavishness. Dan paused at the suite indicated and rang the bell. He waited long moments before a uniformed maid opened the door. "Miss Talbot in?"

"I'm sorry, sir, but Miss Talbot is indisposed." Again Dan bared his badge. The maid stepped aside deferentially. "Who shall I say is calling, sir?"

Dan doffed his hat as he walked into the foyer. "Mr. Collins of the Ace Detective Agency." He waited in the drawing room, admiring the rich appointments of the place. He was studying a huge, needlepoint tapestry when the swish of silk and the soft sobbing of a feminine voice brought him around.

A girl was entering the room, stepping uncertainly across the threshold. Dan gazed at her, making a brief inventory. She was short but maturely figured, her breasts that were almost too large for her body, billowed out the flimsy fabric of her dress. Her eyes were red and agitated as though she had been crying. A knotted ball of wet handkerchief was clutched to her throat.

Dan's hand dropped listlessly from his gun pocket. That he had fully expected to meet the letter-stealer, he realized, but there was not even the resemblance of stature, let alone of face. "I'm Miriam Talbot," the girl

said, softly, her voice broken with grief.

"Dan Collins is the name, Miss Talbot." The question in his mind came to his lips abruptly. "Where is your sister?"

She seemed to be momentarily startled, red-rimmed eyes flashed unknowingly. "I—I'm sorry but I don't know what you mean."

Dan pressed the point. "You have a sister, haven't you, taller than you are?"

She shook her head negatively. "No. I haven't. I was the only child."

Either things were clearing up or becoming terribly muddled. It was hard to believe that the girl in the office had been an impostor as well as a thief. And yet—. "There's no sense beating about the bush, Miss Talbot," Dan began. "I don't want to add to your unhappiness but I feel that you should know just what has developed in this case thus far.

"To begin with, we were engaged by your father after he had received five threatening letters, demanding money. The letters were from a woman and, although your father gave us no indication as to whom the writer might be, we have since learned that your father's affairs involved a number of possible black-mailers."

Her chin quivered and her breath came in great gulps. Dan paused as a nervous tremor shot through her body, agitating the lush mounds of her breasts. "It's not true," she screamed. "It's a lie. My father was true to the memory of my mother. His life was clean and above suspicion. All the fearful, nasty things they're saying about him—they aren't true."

Dan admired her sincere defense. Even though deep down in her heart she may have known the truth, at least, she had guts enough to fight for her own. "You know of no other woman in your father's life, Miss Talbot?"

HE COULD see how deeply the question bit into her heart. The color drained from her

cheeks and she clutched at the balled handkerchief until the knuckles pierced the skin of her hand. "There were no women in my father's life except my mother," she said softly, fighting for calm.

Then the protective instinct in her welled with fury. "You can't make me believe it no matter how much you try! It's all a pack of lies, dirty, sordid lies! Lies told by people who were jealous of my father. Lies—"

She stumbled to a chair and sank into it. Her body was wracked with giant sobs. Dan waited patiently until calm again came to her. "I'm sorry," she said simply, "but it's very hard for me. There's just one thing I'd like to ask you, Mr. Collins. Who told you that my father bothered—bothered with women?"

This was a ticklish spot. Dan knew it. How could he tell her that the man she was about to marry had given him the information? She noticed his hesitation, his reluctance. "You must tell me," she insisted. "As you said before, it's only fair that I know everything. Please, I beg of you."

Dan gulped. "Warner Vastro," he whispered. Like an electric shock that whispered name lifted her from the chair. She stared at him, her eyes pools of melting horror. Dan stepped forward as she swayed uncertainly.

"Oh! Oh!" she gasped, dropping inert in his arms. He lifted her and placed her on a couch. Her face was a greenish white and her lips a pale, sickly purple. Dan's fingers found the hooks at the side of her dress, snapped them apart.

He pulled the bodice flap aside, baring the ivory loveliness of her full-hemi sphered breasts. They rose and fell in spasmodic jerks, quivering with her pain.

A subconscious movement brought Dan's finger-tips to the smooth valley between the rising mounds of flesh. Her skin was cold and yet the softness of its texture gave it warmth. Her eyes fluttered as he

touched her and her lips opened as though in mute appeal.

Dan rose quickly, went into the foyer, called the maid. "Miss Talbot has fainted," he said. "She's on the couch in the drawing room."

Quitting the foyer, Dan made the rounds of the five-room suite finally locating Roland Talbot's room. With practiced dexterity, he rifled the drawers of a cabinet but found nothing. A mahogany desk beckoned. It was locked. Two minutes work with the blade of a knife broke it open.

A folded sheet of lavender note paper caught his eye. Dan spread it out. His heart leaped. It was in the same small handwriting as the blackmailing letters. He read it rapidly.

Darling,

Thanks for the five thousand. I'll expect you tomorrow evening. By the way, I've moved. I'm at the Hotel Edwards now, room 401.

Loads of love,

Kitty.

Dan slipped the lavender note into his jacket pocket and moved swiftly into the foyer. He heard Miriam Talbot's low moans coming from the drawing room. A vision of her creamy white breasts flashed before him but he had no time for that now. Scarcely five minutes had elapsed before he was racing across town in a cab.

THE registration records at the Hotel Edwards turned up the desired name, Kitty Devlin. Dan explained his mission to the carnation bedecked manager. The former showgirl was out, but if Mr. Collins wished, the manager said he could secure a pass-key to the room.

From two that afternoon until darkness blanketed the city, Dan waited in room 401. He was about to give up in disgust and go down to the lobby when a key grated in the

lock. Dan dropped back to a corner of the room, the gun in his hand leveled at the door. He heard voices, one feminine.

The door opened slowly and a shaft of light from the hall danced across the foot of the bed. Tensed, the detective squeezed himself further into the corner. He knew enough not to play his hand until he had them within four walls.

The door slammed shut. There was a *click* and the room was flooded with brightness. "Put them up!" Dan barked. The woman screamed. But the man with her shot his hand out and snapped the light switch down. It was dark as hell.

"Don't move," Dan snapped. "I'll kill the first one that budges." For answer, a body hurtled across the room and a fist shot out of the blackness, sending the detective reeling against the wall. He bounced back and caught another mouthful of knuckles. Clubbing his gun, he waded in, swinging the lethal weapon like a scythe. It smashed against a closet door, splintering the wood. He pistoned his left fist out in the hope of striking home but it fanned the air.

Smack! Knuckles, hard as steel, plowed into his jaw. He felt the warm, sticky flow of blood. Enraged, he beat about like a wild bull. His right foot kicked into the air blindly and the point of his shoe buried itself in soft flesh. He heard a moan of pain, a heavy body falling to the floor. Striking out at the sound of the cry, the butt of his automatic whizzed down and crunched on a man's skull.

Dan slid his hand along the wall and found the light switch. He counted three, then clicked it on and swept the brilliant room with his gun. Kitty Devlin, her face a white putty mask, cringed in a corner.

Dan recognized her immediately despite the fact she had discarded her mannish tweed suit and was garbed in a purely feminine red silk frock.

He shot a glance at the crumpled

supine figure of her escort. Blood seeped from a scalp wound in the man's head. Dan raised his eyes and scanned the trim, voluptuous outlines of the girl. He recalled how he had thought she would be stunning with make-up on and clothes which would accentuate her high breasted figure. But now he had other things to think about, more important things.

So, we meet again, *Miss Talbot*, he said, sarcastically. "I was sort of hoping we would."

SOMETHING relieved her tension. Color returned to her cheeks and her bosom rose majestically. "All right, you've got me," she replied, "so what? You can't pin a damn thing on me. I don't know anything about it."

"You knew enough to pack a gun to get your letters back," Dan snapped. "You knew enough to jam a rod into my back and then bump Talbot, didn't you?"

"It's a lie!" she screamed.

The man on the floor stirred. Blood still seeped from his scalp wound and his face was a contortion of pain. But he managed to scramble to his feet. "You can get out, Tony," Kitty Devlin muttered. He seemed anxious to obey, but Dan waved him back from the door.

"Nothing doing, sonny. You stick around and see the fun."

"He's just a mug," Kitty said. "He doesn't know anything about this."

Dan stepped to the phone, lifted the receiver. "Mugs are my meat," he said. His lips touched the telephone mouthpiece. "Send a cop up to 401 pronto."

With Tony out of the way, Dan settled down to business. He knew he was on the right track and yet there were a few little things still hazy in his mind. He remembered the smell of perfume and the tautly erect pressure of firm breasts in front of the Belvedere. If he could pin that on her, the jig was up. He dropped his pugnacious attitude and spoke softly.

“Now that your boy friend’s out of the way, baby, you and I are going to talk turkey.”

The girl warmed to the change immediately, flashing an inviting smile. “I didn’t think you were one of those hard guys,” she said meaningfully, her hands sliding sensually over the curves of her hips.

Dan moved closer to her, his nostrils trembling acute to the least indication of the scent he was looking for.

“No, I’m not hard, baby. I’m just a dumb detective who likes his fun as well as the next man. I know you’re not the kind of jane who goes around bumping people off.” He shrugged nonchalantly. “Sure, you wanted those letters. Hell, I don’t blame you. I’d want ’em, too, if I were in your boat.” He tried to conceal the sudden tensing of his body as he came close enough to her to get a whiff of the pungent perfume emanating from her hair. There was no mistaking the odor. It was heavy and musk-like. The same he had smelled the night Talbot was killed.

“But still and all, baby,” he continued as normally as possible. “It’d be mighty bad if the bulls got hep to the stunt you pulled.” He was close enough to touch her now. The perfumed sweetness came not only from her hair but also from the white valley of her breasts. These two, Dan was certain, were the same twin charms which had bored into his back as an obligate to the steel barrel of a gun.

She swayed sensually, brushing up against him in a tantalizing butterfly caress. “I’m going to keep it quiet, baby,” Dan murmured, “But you’ve got to play ball with me.” Her hands came off her hips and dropped on his shoulders familiarly. She dampened the red lushness of her lips. “That’s oke by me, big boy. You want to know who finished Talbot, don’t you? All right, I’ll tell you. The dirty rat double-crossed me and—”

Dan wheeled as the door creaked open, but Kitty Devlin was too close to him for him to make a fast spin. The light went out. He

pumped a gun shot into the darkness, watched the fork of flame leap toward the door, heard the bullet plunk harmlessly into the plaster wall. The next moment something hit him at the ankles and he was knocked sprawling.

The cold barrel of a gun swiped across his face, the notched sight ripping into his flesh. Blood spurted into his eyes, blinding him. Like a wild beast he threshed out into the darkness, reaching for his unknown antagonist. The girl screamed, adding to the stark, frenzied tenseness of the situation.

There was a momentary pause, punctuated only by the gasps of hurried breathing. Then Dan saw celestial brilliance flashing before his eyes. He knew he had been hit. His head felt like a swollen balloon. There was nothing he could do about it. He wanted to hold on but the bright sparkles vanished one by one, and there was nothing but darkness again, silent darkness.

HE CAME to with cold wet cloths on his temples. The room was crowded with people; cops, the hotel manager, bell boys. A man with a stethoscope in his ears was leaning over the bed. Dan, with the help of a policeman in uniform, got to his feet. He staggered over to where Kitty Devlin was stretched out on the white coverlet, mumbling incoherently.

The doctor’s rubber stethoscope cone was passing over the bared mound of her left breast. The right one was a jagged mass of bloody flesh, indicating where a bullet had gone through at close range. “Will she live, doc?” Dan queried anxiously.

The physician raised his head. His eyes told the story and his lips reaped it. “There’s not much chance,” he said softly. “The bullet went through her lung.”

Dan turned to one of the cops. “Did you get the guy?”

A negative shake of the flat-foot’s head. “No, he skipped before we got here.”

Dan kneeled on the bed, came down

close to Kitty's moving lips. "Kitty, who did it?"

She mumbled on in a mad delirium. Her left hand crossed her body, and its fingers dug into the torn mound of her breast. She was insensible to pain now.

"Crazy . . . crazy . . . crazy . . ." she muttered. "Take my panties and my dress . . . put plaster on my breasts. Crazy . . . crazy . . . Write the letters." Her body stiffened suddenly.

"Who did it, Kitty?" Dan pleaded.

There was a low ominous rumble in her throat. Her legs shot out and her arms dropped. The doctor nodded.

HOUR after hour Dan worked alone in the Ace Detective Agency office. Before him he had the strip of paper on which he had scribbled Kitty Devlin's last words. They were a meaningless jumble as far as he could see.

He repeated them over to himself. "Crazy . . . crazy. . . . Take my panties and my dress . . . put plaster on my breasts. Crazy . . . crazy. . . . Write the letters."

Suddenly it all came to him. It was weird, almost fantastic but so were a lot of other things. He remembered how Miriam Talbot had reacted to the accusation that her father associated with women. He remembered speaking to Roland Talbot when the Ace Agency had been engaged to track down the anonymous writer of the blackmailing letters. At that time Talbot had denied any knowledge of who the author might be.

It all matched perfectly into the picture of his hunch. He glanced at his watch. Midnight. Just the right time.

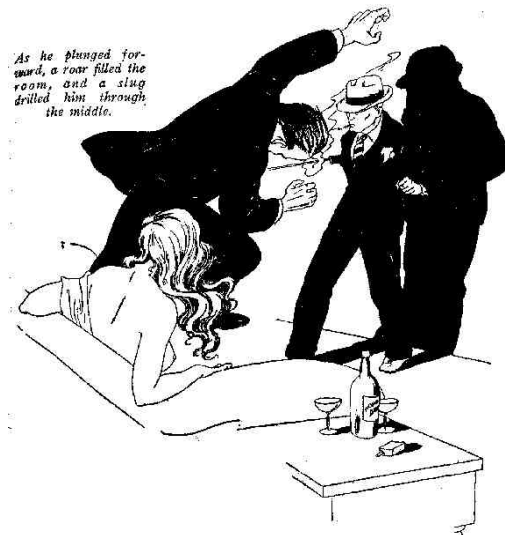
Twenty minutes later he was circling a large stone house on the outskirts of town. He found a basement window partially open, pried it the rest of the way and dropped down into the dark, dank interior. It was slow, tortuous work finding the furnace without the

aid of a light, and he thanked his lucky stars that it was June instead of December.

He opened the boiler door quietly, struck a match in the bowels of the heating plant. The thrill of discovery, of justification coursed through him. Someone had burned something in that furnace very recently.

Dan plunged his hand down to the grate, and buried it in the heap of residue. His fingers came up with something sticky and soft and spongy. Down he went again. A piece of warm metal came into his palm.

That was all he needed. The case was complete.



HE FOUND the stairs leading to the main part of the house, went up on the tips of his toes. Minutes later he was on the main floor, getting his bearings. He heard voices and stood silently in the hall, listening.

A man was talking in low, appealing tones. "We'll get away, darling," he said. "Now, that it's all over. They found the person who did it. It was one of those women. She's dead now. The Ile de France sails at two A. M. We'll go away, you and I, to forget."

Dan moved toward the room from which the voice was coming. He heard faint, soft feminine sobs as he drew near the portiered entrance. His right hand went into

his hip pocket and came out with a gun. With forefinger on the trigger, he broke through the draped velvet.

Warner Vastro and Miriam Talbot were seated on a couch. The broker had his arm about the girl's waist.

"Stay right where you are," Dan snapped. "There's just one question I want to ask you, Vastro! How did you know that Kitty Devlin was shot?"

Vastro paled. His lower jaw dropped in limp dismay. Dan pounded away. "Only you're a little bit wrong about her being dead. She's very much alive and she cooked your goose for you good and plenty."

He gave the broker no time to spar, shooting accusations at him with the rapidity of machine gun fire. She told us how you made plaster casts of her breasts, how you borrowed her dress and her underwear, how you took some of her perfume, how you forced her to write threatening letters to Roland Talbot. She thought you were crazy—but you weren't so crazy."

He tossed the twisted, melted rubber

cups of a false bosom and a tarnished, smoke-grimed belt buckle to the center of the floor. "No, Vastro. You weren't crazy. You were playing a dangerous game and you were playing it in panties! You should have been a female impersonator instead of a broker."

Vastro leaped but Dan was set for him. One bullet would save a lot of time and trouble, do what the State would take months to accomplish. Dan saw Miriam Talbot's grief-stricken face. It would be the best way, he decided, his forefinger tightening. The gun boomed and Warner Vastro pitched on his face, one outstretched hand dropping, ironically, on the remains of the false rubber bosom.

It was days later in the office of the Ace Agency. "That trip on the Ile de France Vastro was talking about, Mimi," Dan suggested coyly. "There's no reason why you can't take it anyway."

She understood but her eyes teased. "Alone?"

Dan shrugged. "Well, I don't know. I'm just a dumb detective, not a mind reader."