Nightmare Town

by Dashiell Hammett, 1894-1961

Published: 1924

Introduction I

From the English-speaking world there are a good many instances of great writers carrying only a few slimmish volumes of their works as they file past St Peter; and just behind Thomas Gray and A.E. Housman we may well spot Samuel Dashiell Hammett in the queue at the 'no-more-than-six-items' counter in the celestial supermarket.

Hammett's six? The five full-length novels written in the brief period 1929-34, including the universally acknowledged masterpieces *The Maltese Falcon* and *The Glass Key*; plus a collection (fairly considerable) of short stories, covering a much longer period. *Nightmare Town* presents the reader with twenty of these stories, most of which have been unavailable in print for some time.

In view then of his comparatively limited output, we may reasonably ask if the high praise bestowed on Hammett by Raymond Chandler and Ross Macdonald—his two most distinguished heirs in the 'hard-boiled' lineage—was perhaps a little over the top. And to put readers' minds at rest (there are enough questions to be sorted out in the stories) the answer is 'decidedly not'. Each of these three writers was practising his craft in a society that was corrupt—with even some of the private eyes potentially corruptible themselves—and in a world that seemed randomly ordained. The advice to fellow writers who were in some doubt about the continuation of a plot was usually 'Have a man come through the door with a gun!' and the ubiquity of guns then was a match for that of mobile phones today. Furthermore, as Chandler maintained, murder was committed not just to provide a detective-story writer with a plot. Almost all the sleuths featured in the troubled and often chaotic years between the 1920's and the 1950's would have been wholly sceptical about solving a case with the aim of putting the universe back to rights, of restoring some semblance of a moral framework to a temporarily blighted planet. No. They were doing the job they were paid to do, as was Hammett himself in his years working for the Pinkerton Detective Agency, with the resolution (if any) of their cases more the result of chance, of hunches, of experience than of some Sherlockian expertise in Eastern European cigar-wrappings.

It is the last mentioned qualification—that of experience, which gives the Hammett stories their distinctive flavour of authenticity. Yet it would be rather misleading to categorise them, in a wholly general sense, as essays in 'realistic' fiction, since Hammett is as liable as most detective-story writers to settle for the reassuringly 'romantic' approach that his gritty and usually fearless sleuths are little short of semi-heroic stature.

Who are these men?

First, we meet the unnamed Continental Op, an operative with the 'Continental Agency', who in spite of his physical appearance, short and fat, is clearly based on the tall and elegant Hammett himself, with the casework based on Hammett's personal experiences as a Pinkerton detective. In this selection, we have seven stories featuring the Op, each narrated in a matter-of-fact style in the first person, and each illustrating some aspect of his tenacity and ruthlessness, but affording virtually no biographical information.

Second (and taking Hammett's first name) is Sam Spade, who features here in *A Man Called Spade*, *Too Many Have Lived*, and *They Can Only Hang You Once*—the only three stories from the whole corpus in which the memorable hero of *The Maltese Falcon* walks and stalks the streets of San Francisco once again. The narration is in the third person, and as with the Op we are given next to no biographical details that we had not already known. Spade has no wish to solve any erudite riddles; he is a hard and shifty fellow quite capable of looking after himself, thank you; his preoccupation is to do his job and to get the better of the criminals some client has paid him to tangle with.

The third—and for me potentially the most interesting—is a man who appears here, just the once, in *The Assistant Murderer,* introduced as follows in the first sentence:

> Gold on the door, edged with black, said ALEXANDER RUSH, PRIVATE DETECTIVE. Inside, an ugly man sat tilted back in a chair, his feet on a yellow desk.

He is a match for the other two – laconic, sceptical, successful; yet I think that Hammett was striking out in something of a new direction with Alec Rush, and I wish that he had been more fully developed elsewhere.

The other stories offer considerable range and variety – not only in locality, but more interestingly in diction and point of view. Take, for instance, the repetitive, virtually unpunctuated narrative of the young boxer (already punch-drunk, we suspect) at the opening of *His Brother's Keeper*:

I knew what a lot of people said about Loney but he was always swell to me. Ever since I remember he was swell to me and I guess I would have liked him just as much even if he had been just somebody else instead of my brother; but I was glad he was not somebody else.

Again, take the psychological study, in *Ruffian's Wife*, of a timid woman who suddenly comes to the shocking realisation that her husband… But readers must read for themselves.

After reading (and greatly enjoying) these stories, what surprised me most was how Hammett has kept the traditional 'puzzle' element alive. The majority of the stories end with some cleverly structured surprise, somewhat reminiscent of O'Henry at his best (see especially, perhaps, *The Second-Story Angel*). But such surprises are not in the style of a pomaded Poirot shepherding his suspects into the library before finally expounding the truth. Much more likely here is that our investigator happens to be seated amid the randomly assembled villains, with a frisson of fear crawling down his back and a loaded revolver pointed at his front.

The secrets of Hammett's huge success as a crime novelist are hardly secrets at all. They comprise his extraordinary talents for story-telling; for characterisation; and for a literary style that is strikingly innovative.

As a story-teller, he has few equals in the genre. In *Who Killed Bob Teal?*, for example, a suspicious party has flagged down a taxi and the taxi's number has been recorded. The narrative continues:

Then Dean and I set about tracing the taxi in which Bob Teal had seen the woman ride away. Half an hour in the taxi company's office gave us the information that she had been driven to a number on Greenwich Street. We went to the Greenwich Street address.

Many of us who have been advised by editors to 'Get on with the story!' would have profited greatly from studying such succinct economy of words.

The characterisation of Hammett's dramatis personae is realised, often vividly, on almost every page here—primarily through the medium of dialogue, secondarily by means of some sharply observed, physical description (especially of the eyes). Such techniques are omnipresent, and require no specific illustration. They are dependent wholly upon the author's writing skills.

Much has been said about Hammett's literary style, and critics have invariably commented on its comparative bareness, with dialogue gritty and terse, and with language pared down to its essentials. But such an assessment may tend to suggest 'barrenness' of style rather than 'bareness'—as if Hammett had been

advised that any brief stretch of even palely-purplish prose was suspect, and that almost every adjective and adverb was potentially *otiose*. Yet we need read only a page or two here to recognise that Hammett knew considerably more about the business of writing than any well-intentioned editor.

Consider, for example, the second paragraph of the major story, *Nightmare Town*:

> A small woman—a girl of twenty in tan flannel—stepped into the street. The wavering Ford missed her by inches, missing her at all only because her backward jump was bird-quick. She caught her lower lip between white teeth, dark eyes flashed annoyance at the passing machine, and she essayed the street again.

Immediately we spot the Hammett 'economy' trademark. But something more, too. We may be a little surprised to find such a wealth of happily chosen epithets here (what a splendid coinage is that 'bird-quick'!) as Hammett paints his small but memorably vivid picture.

This story (from which the book takes its title) shows Hammett at the top of his form, and sets the tone for a collection in which we encounter no sentimentality, with not a clichй in sight, and with none of the crudity of language which (at least for me) disfigures a good deal of present-day American crime fiction.

Here, then, is a book to be read with delight; a book in which we pass through a gallery of bizarre characters (most of them crooks) sketched with an almost wistful cynicism by a writer whom even the great Chandler acknowledged as the master.

COLIN DEXTER
January 2001
Oxford

Introduction II

Although he lived into his sixties, Samuel Dashiell Hammett's prose-writing career encompassed just twelve short years, from 1922 into early 1934. But they were richly productive years, during which he wrote more than a hundred stories. Twenty of them have been assembled here in *Nightmare Town*, displaying the full range of Dashiell Hammett's remarkable talent.

In his famous 1944 essay, *The Simple Art of Murder*, Raymond Chandler openly acknowledged Hammett's genius. He properly credited him as "the ace performer," the one writer responsible for the creation and development of the hard-boiled school of literature, the genre's revolutionary realist. "He took murder out of the Venetian vase and dropped it into the alley," Chandler declared. "Hammett gave murder back to the kind of people that commit it for reasons, not just to provide a corpse."

And crime novelist Ross Macdonald also granted Hammett the number one position in crime literature: "We all came out from under Hammett's black mask."

Born in 1894 to a tobacco-farming Maryland family, young Samuel grew up in Baltimore and left school at fourteen to work for the railroad. An outspoken nonconformist, he moved restlessly from job to job: yardman, stevedore, nail-machine operator in a box factory, freight handler, cannery worker, stock brokerage clerk. He chafed under authority and was often fired, or else quit out of boredom. He was looking for "something extra" from life.

In 1915 Hammett answered a blind ad which stated that applicants must have "wide work experience and be free to travel and respond to all situations." The job itself was not specified.

Intrigued, Hammett found himself at the Baltimore offices of the Pinkerton Detective Agency. For the next seven years, except during periods of army service or illness, Sam Hammett functioned as an agency operative. Unlike most agency detectives, who worked within a single locale, the Pinkerton detectives, based in a variety of cities, ranged the states from east to west, operating across a wide terrain. Thus, Hammett found himself involved in a varied series of cross-country cases, many of them quite dangerous. Along the way, he was clubbed, shot at, and knifed; but, as he summed it up, "I was never bored."

In 1917 his life changed forever. Working for Pinkerton as a strikebreaker against the Industrial Workers of the World in Butte, Montana, Hammett was offered five thousand dollars to kill union agitator Frank Little. After Hammett bitterly refused, Little was lynched in a crime ascribed to vigilantes. As Lillian Hellman later observed: "This must have been, for Hammett, an abiding horror. I can date [his] belief that he was living in a corrupt society from Little's murder." Hammett's political conscience was formed in Butte. From this point forward, it would permeate his life and work.

In 1918 he left the agency for the first time to enlist in the army, where he was later diagnosed with tuberculosis. ("Guess it runs in the family. My mother had t.b.") Discharged a year later, he was strong enough to rejoin Pinkerton. Unfortunately, the pernicious disease plagued him for many years and took a fearsome toll on his health.

In 1921, with "bad lungs," Hammett was sent to a hospital in Tacoma, Washington, where he was attended by Josephine Dolan, an attractive young ward nurse. This unworldly orphan girl found her new patient "handsome and mature." She admired his military neatness and laughed at all his jokes. Soon they were intimate. Jose (pronounced "Joe's") was very serious about their relationship, but to Hammett it was little more than a casual diversion. At this point in his life he was incapable of love and, in fact, mistrusted the word.

He declared in an unpublished sketch: "Our love seemed dependent on not being phrased. It seemed that if [I] said 'I love you,' the next instant it would have been a lie." Hammett maintained this attitude throughout his life. He could write "with love" in a letter, but he was incapable of verbally declaring it.

Finally, with his illness in remission, Hammett moved to San Francisco, where he received a letter from Jose telling him that she was pregnant. Would Sam marry her? He would.

They became husband and wife in the summer of 1921, with Hammett once again employed by Pinkerton. But by the time daughter Mary Jane was born that

October, Hammett was experiencing health problems caused by the cold San Francisco fog, which was affecting his weakened lungs.

In February 1922, at age twenty-seven, he left the agency for the last time. A course at Munson's Business College, a secretarial school, seemed to offer the chance to learn about professional writing. As a Pinkerton agent, Hammett had often been cited for his concise, neatly fashioned case reports. Now it was time to see if he could utilize this latent ability.

By the close of that year he'd made small sales to *The Smart Set* and to a new detective pulp called *The Black Mask*. In December 1922 this magazine printed Hammett's "The Road Home," about a detective named Hagedorn who has been hired to chase down a criminal. After leading Hagedorn halfway around the globe, the fugitive offers the detective a share of "one of the richest gem beds in Asia" if he'll throw in with him. At the story's climax, heading into the jungle in pursuit of his prey, Hagedorn is thinking about the treasure. The reader is led to believe that the detective is tempted by the offer of riches, and that he *will* be corrupted when he sees the jewels. Thus, Hammett's career-long theme of man's basic corruptibility is prefigured here, in his first crime tale.

In 1923 Hammett created the Continental Op for *The Black Mask* and was selling his fiction at a steady rate. In later years, a reporter asked him for his secret. Hammett shrugged. "I was a detective, so I wrote about detectives." He added: "All of my characters were based on people I've known personally, or known about."

A second daughter, Josephine Rebecca, was born in May 1926, and Hammett realized that he could not continue to support his family on *Black Mask* sales. He quit prose writing to take a job as advertising manager for a local jeweler at $350 a month. He quickly learned to appreciate the distinctive features of watches and jeweled rings, and was soon writing the store's weekly newspaper ads. Al Samuels was greatly pleased by his new employee's ability to generate sales with expertly worded advertising copy. Hammett was "a natural."

But his tuberculosis surfaced again, and Hammett was forced to leave his job after just five months. He was now receiving 100 percent disability from the Veterans Bureau. During this flare-up he was nearly bedridden, so weak he had to lean on a line of chairs in order to walk between bed and bathroom. Because his tuberculosis was highly contagious, his wife and daughters had to live apart from him.

As Hammett's health improved, Joseph T. Shaw, the new editor of *Black Mask*, was able to lure him back to the magazine by promising higher rates (up to six cents a word) and offering him "a free creative hand" in developing novel-length material. "Hammett was the leader in what finally brought the magazine its distinctive form," Shaw declared. "He told his stories with a new kind of compulsion and authenticity. And he was one of the most careful and painstaking workmen I have ever known."

A two-part novella, *The Big Knockover*, was followed by the *Black Mask* stories that led to his first four published books: *Red Harvest*, *The Dain Curse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*. They established Hammett as the nation's premier writer of detective fiction.

By 1930 he had separated from his family and moved to New York, where he reviewed books for the Evening Post. Later that year, at the age of thirty-six, he journeyed back to the West Coast after *The Maltese Falcon* sold to Hollywood, to develop screen material for Paramount. Hammett cut a dapper figure in the film capital. A sharp, immaculate dresser, he was dubbed "a Hollywood Dream Prince" by one local columnist. Tall, with a trim mustache and a regal bearing, he was also known as a charmer, exuding an air of mature masculinity that made him extremely attractive to women.

It was in Hollywood, late that year, that he met aspiring writer Lillian Hellman and began an intense, volatile, often mutually destructive relationship that lasted, on and off, for the rest of his life. To Hellman, then in her mid-twenties, Hammett was nothing short of spectacular. Hugely successful, he was handsome, mature, well-read, and witty—a combination she found irresistible.

Hammett eventually worked with Hellman on nearly all of her original plays (the exception being *The Searching Wind*). He painstakingly supervised structure, scenes, dialogue, and character, guiding Hellman through several productions. His contributions were enormous, and after Hammett's death, Hellman never wrote another original play.

In 1934, the period following the publication of *The Thin Man*, Hammett was at the height of his career. On the surface, his novel featuring Nick and Nora Charles was brisk and humorous, and it inspired a host of imitations. At heart, however, the book was about a disillusioned man who had rejected the detective business and no longer saw value in the pursuit of an investigative career.

The parallel between Nick Charles and Hammett was clear; he was about to reject the genre that had made him famous. He had never been comfortable as a mystery writer. Detective stories no longer held appeal for him. ("This hard-boiled stuff is a menace.")

He wanted to write an original play, followed by what he termed "socially significant novels," but he never indicated exactly what he had in mind. However, after 1934, no new Hammett fiction was printed during his lifetime. He attempted mainstream novels under several titles: *There Was a Young Man* (1938); *My Brother Felix* (1939); *The Valley Sheep Are Fatter* (1944); *The Hunting Boy* (1949); and *December 1* (1950). In each case the work was aborted after a brief start. His only sizable piece of fiction, *Tulip* (1952)—unfinished at 17,000 words—was printed after his death. It was about a man who could no longer write.

Hammett's problems were twofold. Having abandoned detective fiction, he had nothing to put in its place. Even more crippling, he had shut himself down emotionally, erecting an inner wall between himself and his public. He had lost the ability to communicate, to share his emotions. As the years slipped past him, he drank, gambled, womanized, and buried himself in Marxist doctrines. His only creative outlet was his work on Hellman's plays. There is no question that his input was of tremendous value to her, but it did not satisfy his desire to prove himself as a major novelist.

The abiding irony of Hammett's career is that he had already produced at least three major novels: *Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *The Glass Key*—all classic works respected around the world.

But here, in this collection, we deal with his shorter tales, many of them novella length. They span a wide range, and some are better than others, but each is pure Hammett, and the least of them is marvelously entertaining.

What makes Dashiell Hammett's work unique in the genre of mystery writing? The answer is: authenticity.

Hammett was able to bring the gritty' argot of the streets into print, to realistically portray thugs, hobos, molls, stoolies, gunmen, political bosses, and crooked clients, allowing them to talk and behave on paper as they had talked and behaved during Hammett's manhunting years. His stint as a working operative with Pinkerton provided a rock-solid base for his fiction. He had pursued murderers, investigated bank swindlers, gathered evidence for criminal trials, shadowed jewel thieves, tangled with safecrackers and holdup men, tracked counterfeiters, been involved in street shoot-outs, exposed forgers and blackmailers, uncovered a missing gold shipment, located a stolen Ferris wheel, and performed as guard, hotel detective, and strikebreaker.

When Hammett sent his characters out to work the mean streets of San Francisco, readers responded to his hard-edged depiction of crime as it actually existed. No other detective-fiction writer of the period could match his kind of reality.

Nightmare Town takes us back to those early years when Hammett's talent burned flame-bright, the years when he was writing with force and vigor in a spare, stripped style that matched the intensity of his material. Working mainly in the pages of *Black Mask* (where ten of these present stories were first printed), Hammett launched a new style of detective fiction in America: bitter, tough, and unsentimental, reflecting the violence of the time. The staid English tradition of the tweedy gentleman detective was shattered, and murder bounced from the tea garden to the back alley. The polite British sleuth gave way to a hard-boiled man of action who didn't mind bending some rules to get the job done, who could hand out punishment and take it, and who often played both sides of the law.

The cynic and the idealist were combined in Hammett's protagonists: their carefully preserved toughness allowed them to survive. Nobody could bluff them or buy them off. They learned to keep themselves under tight control, moving warily through a dark landscape (Melville's "appalling ocean") in which sudden death, duplicity, and corruption were part of the scenery. Nevertheless, they idealistically hoped for a better world and worked toward it. Hammett gave these characters organic life.

Critic Graham McInnes finds that "Hammett's prose… has the polish and meat of an essay by Bacon or a poem by Donne, both of whom also lived in an age of violence and transition."

The theme of a corrupt society runs like a dark thread through much of Hammett's work. The title story of this collection, which details a "nightmare" town in which every citizen—from policeman to businessman—is crooked, foreshadows his gangster-ridden saga of Poisonville in *Red Harvest*. (The actual setting for his novel was Butte, Montana, and reflects the corruption Hammett had found there with Frank Little's death in 1917.)

Hammett saw the world around him as chaotic, without form or design. By the mid-1930s he had convinced himself that radical politics could provide a sense of

order, and that perhaps an ideal "people's world" was possible. Communism seemed to promise such a world, but he eventually discovered that it was an illusion. In his last years, Hammett realized that there was no apparent solution to world chaos.

Much has been written on the typical "Hammett hero."

Critic John Paterson claims that he "is, in the final analysis, the apotheosis of every man of good will who, alienated by the values of his time, seeks desperately and mournfully to live without shame, to live without compromise to his integrity."

Philip Durham, who wrote the first biography of Raymond Chandler, traces Hammett's hero back to

a tradition that began on the frontier in the early part of the nineteenth century. This American literary hero appeared constantly in the dime novels of the period, and was ready-made for such Western writers of the twentieth century as Owen Wister and Zane Grey. By the time Hammett picked him up in the pages of *Black Mask*, his heroic characteristics were clearly established: courage, physical strength, indestructibility, indifference to danger and death, a knightly attitude, celibacy, a measure of violence, and a sense of justice.

Hammett's most sustained character, the Continental Op (who is featured here in seven stories), reflects the author's dark world view, but he's not overtly political, nor is he knightly. He's a hard-working detective trying to get a job done. The Op describes himself as having a face that is "truthful witness to a life that hasn't been overwhelmed with refinement and gentility," adding that he is "short, middle-aged, and thick-waisted," and stubborn enough to be called "pig-headed."

Hammett claimed to have based the Op on the man who had trained him to be a detective, the Pinkerton Agency's Jimmy Wright of Baltimore. Wright taught young Hammett a basic code: Don't cheat your client. Stay anonymous. Avoid undue physical risks. Be objective. Don't become emotionally involved with a client. And never violate your integrity. This code stayed with Hammett; it not only served him while he was a working detective, but it also gave him a set of personal rules that shaped his actions throughout his life.

Of course, despite his age and physical appearance, the Op is Hammett himself in fictional guise. Told in the first person, many of the Op's adventures are fictionalized versions of actual cases that Hammett worked on during his sporadic years as a detective. When young Hammett first joined the Baltimore branch of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, the headquarters were in the Continental Building—clearly the source for the Op's fictitious agency.

Hammett deliberately kept his character's biographical background to a minimum. As critic Peter Wolfe notes, "he tells us nothing of [the Op's] family, education, or religious beliefs." Of course the Op *has* no religion in any traditional sense of the term; his religion is the always dangerous game of manhunting, a trade he pursues with near-sacred zeal.

If one sifts carefully through the canon (some three dozen stories), it is revealed that the Op joined Continental as "a young sprout of twenty" (Hammett's age when he became a Pinkerton operative), that he held a captain's commission in wartime military intelligence, that he speaks some French and German, eats all his meals out, smokes Fatima cigarettes, enjoys poker and prizefights, and avoids romantic entanglements ("They don't go with the job"). Pragmatic, hard-souled, and

tenacious, he resorts to physical violence when necessary and uses a gun when he has to, but prefers using his wits. He is as close to an actual working detective as Hammett could make him.

Hammett featured the Op in his earlier long works, *Blood Money* (also known as *The Big Knockover*), *Red Harvest*, and *The Dain Curse*, all of which were revised from *Black Mask* novellas.

His next major fictional creation was San Francisco private eye Samuel Spade, to whom Hammett gave his first name. (As a Pinkerton, he had always been called Sam. When he turned to writing, he became simply Dashiell Hammett.) Spade made his debut in *The Maltese Falcon*, a five-part *Black Mask* serial that Hammett carefully reworked for book publication by Alfred A. Knopf. Most critics rate this "saga of a private detective" as the finest crime novel written in this century. Describing his character for a Modern Library edition of *Falcon*, Hammett stated:

Spade had no original. He is a dream man in the sense that he is what most of the private detectives I worked with would like to have been and what quite a few of them, in their cockier moments, thought they approached. For your private detective does not…want to be an erudite solver of riddles in the Sherlock Holmes manner; he wants to be a hard and shifty fellow, able to take care of himself in any situation, able to get the best of anybody he comes in contact with, whether criminal, innocent bystander, or client.

Indeed, this was precisely the way Hammett wrote Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*—able to match wits with the crafty fat man, Casper Gutman, in tracking down the fabled bird of the title; able to handle the intrusive police; and able to fend off the advances of seductive Brigid O'Shaughnessy in solving the murder of his partner, Miles Archer.

Hammett never intended to make Spade a continuing character; in completing *The Maltese Falcon* he was "done with him." Yet he had not foreseen the book's wide and lasting popularity, nor that it would become a supremely successful radio series, nor that no less than three motion pictures would be produced based on the published novel.

The public demanded more Spade stories, and Hammett's literary agent pleaded with the author to come up with new adventures. Hammett was reluctant, but he was also short of money. He made vast sums in Hollywood as a scriptwriter, but he squandered every dollar as quickly as he earned it. Money was for spending and Hammett always felt that more of it would magically appear as needed. Finally, he sat down to rap out three new Spade stories, placing two of them with *The American Magazine* and the final one with *Collier's*.

All three are in the present collection: *A Man Called Spade*, *Too Many Have Lived*, and *They Can Only Hang You Once*. The tales are crisp, efficient, and swift-moving.

The other stories assembled here demonstrate Hammett's bold experimentation with language and viewpoint. Compare the fussy, ornate narration in *A Man Named Thin* (featuring a poet-detective) with the crude, uneducated narration of the young boxer in *His Brother's Keeper*. Both are told first-person, but they are leagues apart. Hammett tackles a female point of view in the superbly written *Ruffian's Wife*, and brings off a neat twist ending in *The Second-Story Angel* (note the understated humor in this one).

Both *Afraid of a Gun* and *The Man Who Killed Dan Odams* are set far from his usual San Francisco locale and demonstrate the wide range of Hammett's fiction. *Gun* takes place in the high mountain country, and *Dan Odams* is a semimodern Western set in Montana. They represent Hammett in top form.

While the majority of pulp writers in the twenties and thirties were grinding out stories for money, Hammett worked as a dedicated artist. He gave each story the best of himself, laboring over each sentence, each turn of phrase. And he was constantly seeking new ideas and new characters. His protagonist in *The Assistant Murderer* is a prime example. With Alec Rush, the author created a detective described as incredibly ugly, a radical departure from the usual magazine hero. Hammett was striking out in a fresh direction with this story, which involves a complex case solved not by Rush but by the killer's confession.

The Assistant Murderer was written just before Hammett temporarily left *Black Mask* for his unsuccessful attempt at a career in advertising. One feels that had he remained with the magazine, Hammett might well have written more stories featuring this offbeat detective.

During the pulp era, editors constantly called for "Action! More action!" Hammett decided to see just how much action he could pack into a single novella. Originally printed in *Argosy All-Story Weekly*, the title story of this collection, *Nightmare Town*, is a tour de force in sustained violence. The hero wields an ebony walking stick with devastating effectiveness, cracking skulls and breaking bones in the finest pulp tradition.

An important contribution in *Nightmare Town* is *The First Thin Man*, which here achieves its first book printing. This early version of 1930 stands in sharp contrast to the novel Hammett eventually finished for Alfred A. Knopf three years later, with vast differences in basic approach, mood, plot, and tone. A call from Hollywood and the promise of substantial film money had caused Hammett to abandon the original manuscript at sixty-five typed pages. When he returned to it three years later, John Guild, the Op-like working detective—dedicated, stoic, close-mouthed—was replaced by Nick Charles, a hard-drinking, party-loving cynic, an ex-crime solver with no desire to solve more crimes; he just wanted another martini. It was Nick's wife, Nora (modeled directly on Lillian Hellman), who badgered him into becoming a detective again to solve the case of the missing thin man.

Dashiell Hammett had undergone a major life change between 1930 and 1933, and Nick Charles marked the end of Hammett's career as a novelist. He had written himself into a blind corner and no longer believed that the criminal ills of society could be dealt with on a one-to-one basis. In Hammett's view, a lone detective (such as Sam Spade or John Guild) could do nothing to stem the mounting tide of societal corruption. The detective's code of personal honor could have no effect on a dishonorable world. Hammett's core bitterness and cynicism, reflected in a less obvious form in his earlier work, had now taken center stage. He was no longer able to believe in heroes. Even plainspoken, down-to-earth, working heroes.

In 1951, after he was sentenced for contempt because he refused to name names before a federal judge in New York, Hammett spent five months in jail in defense of his political beliefs. But he never believed in political violence and had

been shocked when Senator Joseph McCarthy asked him if he had ever engaged in an act of sabotage against the United States. Having served his country in two world wars as an enlisted soldier, he loved America, even as he despised its capitalist politics.

Hammett's final years, following his release from prison, were sad ones. His name was removed from a film based on one of his characters; his radio shows were canceled; and a scheduled collection of his fiction was dropped by the publisher. He spent most of his last decade isolated in a small gatekeeper's cottage in Katonah, New York. On two occasions shots were fired through his front windows, but Hammett bore his exile with stoic acceptance.

Sick and frail, blacklisted as a political pariah, unable to write, and hounded by the IRS for taxes on money he no longer earned, Samuel Dashiell Hammett died of lung cancer in 1961, at the age of sixty-six.

He considered himself a literary failure, but, as this book helps prove, he was anything but that. No other writer since Edgar Allan Poe has exerted a greater influence on mystery fiction. His art was timeless and his work has not dated. In the genre of detective fiction, he was a master.

That mastery is evident in *Nightmare Town*, the largest collection of his shorter works and by far the most comprehensive.

WILLIAM F. NOLAN
West Hills, California
1999

Nightmare Town

A Ford—whitened by desert travel until it was almost indistinguishable from the dust-clouds that swirled around it—came down Izzard's Main Street. Like the dust, it came swiftly, erratically, zigzagging the breadth of the roadway.

A small woman—a girl of twenty in tan flannel—stepped into the street. The wavering Ford missed her by inches, missing her at all only because her backward jump was bird-quick. She caught her lower lip between white teeth, dark eyes flashed annoyance at the rear of the passing machine, and she essayed the street again.

Near the opposite curb the Ford charged down upon her once more. But turning had taken some of its speed. She escaped it this time by scampering the few feet between her and the sidewalk ahead.

Out of the moving automobile a man stepped. Miraculously he kept his feet, stumbling, sliding, until an arm crooked around an iron awning-post jerked him into an abrupt halt. He was a large man in bleached khaki, tall, broad, and thick-armed; his gray eyes were bloodshot; face and clothing were powdered heavily with dust. One of his hands clutched a thick, black stick, the other swept off his hat, and he bowed with exaggerated lowness before the girl's angry gaze.

The bow completed, he tossed his hat carelessly into the street, and grinned grotesquely through the dirt that masked his face—a grin that accented the heaviness of a begrimed and hair-roughened jaw.

"I *beg* y'r par'on," he said. " 'F I hadn't been careful I believe I'd a'most hit you. 'S unreli'ble, tha' wagon. Borr'ed it from an engi—eng'neer. Don't ever borrow one from eng'neer. They're unreli'ble."

The girl looked at the place where he stood as if no one stood there, as if, in fact, no one had ever stood there, turned her small back on him, and walked very precisely down the street.

He stared after her with stupid surprise in his eyes until she had vanished through a doorway in the middle of the block. Then he scratched his head, shrugged, and turned to look across the street, where his machine had pushed its nose into the red-brick side wall of the Bank of Izzard and now shook and clattered as if in panic at finding itself masterless.

"Look at the son-of-a-gun," he exclaimed.

A hand fastened upon his arm. He turned his head, and then, though he stood a good six feet himself, had to look up to meet the eyes of the giant who held his arm.

"We'll take a little walk," the giant said.

The man in bleached khaki examined the other from the tips of his broad-toed shoes to the creased crown of his black hat, examined him with a whole-hearted admiration that was unmistakable in his red-rimmed eyes. There were nearly seven massive feet of the speaker. Legs like pillars held up a great hogshead of a body, with wide shoulders that sagged a little, as if with their own excessive weight. He was a man of perhaps forty-five, and his face was thick-featured, phlegmatic, with sunlines around small light eyes—the face of a deliberate man.

"My God, you're big!" the man in khaki exclaimed when he had finished his examination; and then his eyes brightened. "Let's wrestle. Bet you ten bucks against fifteen I can throw you. Come on!"

The giant chuckled deep in his heavy chest, took the man in khaki by the nape of the neck and an arm, and walked down the street with him.

Steve Threefall awakened without undue surprise at the unfamiliarity of his surroundings as one who has awakened in strange places before. Before his eyes were well open he knew the essentials of his position. The feel of the shelf-bunk on which he lay and the sharp smell of disinfectant in his nostrils told him that he was in jail. His head and his mouth told him that he had been drunk; and the three-day growth of beard on his face told him he had been very drunk.

As he sat up and swung his feet down to the floor details came back to him. The two days of steady drinking in Whitetufts on the other side of the Nevada-California line, with Harris, the hotel proprietor, and Whiting, an irrigation engineer. The boisterous arguing over desert travel, with his own Gobi experience matched against the American experiences of the others. The bet that he could drive from Whitetufts to Izzard in daylight with nothing to drink but the especially bitter white liquor they were drinking at the time. The start in the grayness of imminent dawn, in Whiting's Ford, with Whiting and Harris staggering down the street after him, waking the town with their drunken shouts and roared-out mocking advice, until he had reached the desert's edge. Then the drive through

the desert, along the road that was hotter than the rest of the desert, with—He chose not to think of the ride. He had made it, though—had won the bet. He couldn't remember the amount of the latter.

"So you've come out of it at last?" a rumbling voice inquired.

The steel-slatted door swung open and a man filled the cell's door. Steve grinned up at him. This was the giant who would not wrestle. He was coatless and vestless now, and loomed larger than before. One suspender strap was decorated with a shiny badge that said MARSHAL.

"Feel like breakfast?" he asked.

"I could do things to a can of black coffee," Steve admitted.

"All right. But you'll have to gulp it. Judge Denvir is waiting to get a crack at you, and the longer you keep him waiting, the tougher it'll be for you."

The room in which Tobin Denvir, J.P., dealt justice was a large one on the third floor of a wooden building. It was scantily furnished with a table, an ancient desk, a steel engraving of Daniel Webster, a shelf of books sleeping under the dust of weeks, a dozen uncomfortable chairs, and half as many cracked and chipped china cuspidors.

The judge sat between desk and table, with his feet on the latter. They were small feet, and he was a small man. His face was filled with little irritable lines, his lips were thin and tight, and he had the bright, lidless eyes of a bird.

"Well, what's he charged with?" His voice was thin, harshly metallic. He kept his feet on the table.

The marshal drew a deep breath, and recited:

"Driving on the wrong side of the street, exceeding the speed limit, driving while under the influence of liquor, driving without a driver's license, endangering the lives of pedestrians by taking his hands off the wheel, and parking improperly—on the sidewalk up against the bank."

The marshal took another breath, and added, with manifest regret:

"There was a charge of attempted assault, too, but that Vallance girl won't appear, so that'll have to be dropped."

The justice's bright eyes turned upon Steve.

"What's your name?" he growled.

"Steve Threefall."

"Is that your real name?" the marshal asked.

"Of course it is," the justice snapped. "You don't think anybody'd be damn fool enough to give a name like that unless it was his, do you?" Then to Steve: "What have you got to say—guilty or not?"

"I was a little—"

"Are you guilty or not?"

"Oh, I suppose I did—"

"That's enough! You're fined a hundred and fifty dollars and costs. The costs are fifteen dollars and eighty cents, making a total of a hundred and sixty-five dollars and eighty cents. Will you pay it or will you go to jail?"

"I'll pay it if I've got it," Steve said, turning to the marshal. "You took my money. Have I got that much?"

The marshal nodded his massive head.

"You have," he said, "exactly—to the nickel. Funny it should have come out like that—huh?"

"Yes—funny," Steve repeated.

While the justice of the peace was making out a receipt for the fine, the marshal restored Steve's watch, tobacco and matches, pocket-knife, keys, and last of all the black walking-stick. The big man weighed the stick in his hand and examined it closely before he gave it up. It was thick and of ebony, but heavy even for that wood, with a balanced weight that hinted at loaded ferrule and knob. Except for a space the breadth of a man's hand in its middle, the stick was roughened, cut and notched with the marks of hard use—marks that much careful polishing had failed to remove or conceal. The unscarred hand's-breadth was of a softer black than the rest—as soft a black as the knob—as if it had known much contact with a human palm.

"Not a bad weapon in a pinch," the marshal said meaningly as he handed the stick to its owner. Steve took it with the grasp a man reserves for a favorite and constant companion.

"Not bad," he agreed. "What happened to the flivver?"

"It's in the garage around the corner on Main Street. Pete said it wasn't altogether ruined, and he thinks he can patch it up if you want."

The justice held out the receipt.

"Am I all through here now?" Steve asked.

"I hope so," Judge Denvir said sourly.

"Both of us," Steve echoed. He put on his hat, tucked the black stick under his arm, nodded to the big marshal, and left the room.

Steve Threefall went down the wooden stairs toward the street in as cheerful a frame of mind as his body—burned out inwardly with white liquor and outwardly by a day's scorching desert-riding—would permit. That justice had emptied his pockets of every last cent disturbed him little. That, he knew, was the way of justice everywhere with the stranger, and he had left the greater part of his money with the hotel proprietor in Whitetufts. He had escaped a jail sentence, and he counted himself lucky. He would wire Harris to send him some of his money, wait here until the Ford was repaired, and then drive back to Whitetufts—but not on a whisky ration this time.

"You will not!" a voice cried in his ear.

He jumped, and then laughed at his alcohol-jangled nerves. The words had not been meant for him. Beside him, at a turning of the stairs, was an open window, and opposite it, across a narrow alley, a window in another building was open. This window belonged to an office in which two men stood facing each other across a flat-topped desk.

One of them was middle-aged and beefy, in a black broadcloth suit out of which a white-vested stomach protruded. His face was purple with rage. The man who faced him was younger—a man of perhaps thirty, with a small dark mustache, finely chiseled features, and satiny brown hair. His slender athlete's body was immaculately clothed in gray suit, gray shirt, gray and silver tie, and on the desk before him lay a Panama hat with gray band. His face was as white as the other's was purple.

The beefy man spoke—a dozen words pitched too low to catch.

The younger man slapped the speaker viciously across the face with an open hand—a hand that then flashed back to its owner's coat and flicked out a snub-nosed automatic pistol.

"You big lard-can," the younger man cried, his voice sibilant; "you'll lay off or I'll spoil your vest for you!"

He stabbed the protuberant vest with the automatic, and laughed into the scared fat face of the beefy man—laughed with a menacing flash of even teeth and dark slitted eyes. Then he picked up his hat, pocketed the pistol, and vanished from Steve's sight. The fat man sat down.

Steve went on down to the street.

Steve unearthed the garage to which the Ford had been taken, found a greasy mechanic who answered to the name of Pete, and was told that Whiting's automobile would be in condition to move under its own power within two days.

"A beautiful snootful you had yesterday," Pete grinned.

Steve grinned back and went on out. He went down to the telegraph office, next door to the Izzard Hotel, pausing for a moment on the sidewalk to look at a glowing, cream-colored Vauxhall-Velox roadster that stood at the curb—as out of place in this grimy factory town as a harlequin opal in a grocer's window.

In the doorway of the telegraph office Steve paused again, abruptly.

Behind the counter was a girl in tan flannel—the girl he had nearly run down twice the previous afternoon—the "Vallance girl" who had refrained from adding to justice's account against Steve Threefall. In front of the counter, leaning over it, talking to her with every appearance of intimacy, was one of the two men he had seen from the staircase window half an hour before—the slender dandy in gray who had slapped the other's face and threatened him with an automatic.

The girl looked up, recognized Steve, and stood very erect. He took off his hat, and advanced smiling.

"I'm awfully sorry about yesterday," he said. "I'm a crazy fool when I—"

"Do you wish to send a telegram?" she asked frigidly.

"Yes," Steve said; "I also wish to—"

"There are blanks and pencils on the desk near the window," and she turned her back on him.

Steve felt himself coloring, and since he was one of the men who habitually grin when at a loss, he grinned now, and found himself looking into the dark eyes of the man in gray.

That one smiled back under his little brown mustache, and said:

"Quite a time you had yesterday."

"Quite," Steve agreed, and went to the table the girl had indicated. He wrote his telegram:

Henry Harris
Harris Hotel, Whitetufts:
Arrived right side up, but am in hock. Wire me two hundred dollars. Will be back Saturday.

Threefall. T.

But he did not immediately get up from the desk. He sat there holding the piece of paper in his fingers, studying the man and girl, who were again engaged in confidential conversation over the counter. Steve studied the girl most.

She was quite a small girl, no more than five feet in height, if that; and she had that peculiar rounded slenderness which gives a deceptively fragile appearance. Her face was an oval of skin whose fine whiteness had thus far withstood the grimy winds of Izzard; her nose just missed being upturned, her violet-black eyes just missed being too theatrically large, and her black-brown hair just missed being too bulky for the small head it crowned; but in no respect did she miss being as beautiful as a figure from a Monticelli canvas.

All these things Steve Threefall, twiddling his telegram in sun-brown fingers, considered and as he considered them he came to see the pressing necessity of having his apologies accepted. Explain it as you will—he carefully avoided trying to explain it to himself—the thing was there. One moment there was nothing, in the four continents he knew, of any bothersome importance to Steve Threefall; the next moment he was under an unescapable compulsion to gain the favor of this small person in tan flannel with brown ribbons at wrists and throat.

At this point the man in gray leaned farther over the counter, to whisper something to the girl. She flushed, and her eyes flinched. The pencil in her hand fell to the counter, and she picked it up with small fingers that were suddenly incongruously awkward. She made a smiling reply, and went on with her writing, but the smile seemed forced.

Steve tore up his telegram and composed another:

> I made it, slept it off in the cooler, and I am going to settle here a while. There are things about the place I like. Wire my money and send my clothes to hotel here. Buy Whiting's Ford from him as cheap as you can for me.

He carried the blank to the counter and laid it down.

The girl ran her pencil over it, counting the words.

"Forty-seven," she said, in a tone that involuntarily rebuked the absence of proper telegraphic brevity.

"Long, but it's all right," Steve assured her. "I'm sending it collect."

She regarded him icily.

"I can't accept a collect message unless I know that the sender can pay for it if the addressee refuses it. It's against the rules."

"You'd better make an exception this time," Steve told her solemnly, "because if you don't you'll have to lend me the money to pay for it."

"I'll have—?"

"You will," he insisted. "You got me into this jam, and it's up to you to help me get out. The Lord knows you've cost me enough as it is—nearly two hundred dollars! The whole thing was your fault."

"*My fault?*"

"It was! Now I'm giving you a chance to square yourself. Hurry it off, please, because I'm hungry and I need a shave. I'll be waiting on the bench outside." And he spun on his heel and left the office.

One end of the bench in front of the telegraph office was occupied when Steve, paying no attention to the man who sat there, made himself comfortable on the other. He put his black stick between his legs and rolled a cigarette with thoughtful slowness, his mind upon the just completed scent in the office.

Why, he wondered, whenever there was some special reason for gravity, did he always find himself becoming flippant? Why, whenever he found himself face to face with a situation that was important, that meant something to him, did he slip uncontrollably into banter—play the clown? He lit his cigarette and decided scornfully—as he had decided a dozen times before—that it all came from a childish attempt to conceal his self-consciousness; that for all his thirty-three years of life and his eighteen years of rubbing shoulders with the world—its rough corners as well as its polished—he was still a green boy underneath—a big kid.

"A neat package you had yesterday," the man who sat on the other end of the bench remarked.

"Yeah," Steve admitted without turning his head. He supposed he'd be hearing about his crazy arrival as long as he stayed in Izzard.

"I reckon old man Denvir took you to the cleaner's as usual?"

"Uh-huh!" Steve said, turning now for a look at the other.

He saw a very tall and very lean man in rusty brown, slouched down on the small of his back, angular legs thrust out across the sidewalk. A man past forty, whose gaunt, melancholy face was marked with lines so deep that they were folds in the skin rather than wrinkles. His eyes were the mournful chestnut eyes of a basset hound, and his nose was as long and sharp as a paper-knife. He puffed on a black cigar, getting from it a surprising amount of smoke, which he exhaled upward, his thin nose splitting the smoke into two gray plumes.

"Ever been to our fair young city before?" this melancholy individual asked next. His voice held a monotonous rhythm that was not unpleasant to the ear.

"No, this is my first time."

The thin man nodded ironically.

"You'll like it if you stay," he said. "It's very interesting."

"What's it all about?" Steve asked, finding himself mildly intrigued by his benchmate.

"Soda niter. You scoop it up off the desert, and boil and otherwise cook it, and sell it to fertilizer manufacturers, and nitric acid manufacturers, and any other kind of manufacturers who can manufacture something out of soda niter. The factory in which, for which, and from which you do all this lies yonder, beyond the railroad tracks."

He waved a lazy arm down the street, to where a group of square concrete buildings shut out the desert at the end of the thoroughfare.

"Suppose you don't play with this soda?" Steve asked, more to keep the thin man talking than to satisfy any thirst for local knowledge. "What do you do then?"

The thin man shrugged his sharp shoulders.

"That depends," he said, "on who you are. If you're Dave Brackett"—he wiggled a finger at the red bank across the street—"you gloat over your mortgages, or whatever it is a banker does; if you're Grant Fernie, and too big for a man without being quite big enough for a horse, you pin a badge on your bosom and throw rough-riding strangers into the can until they sober up; or if you're Larry Ormsby,

and your old man owns the soda works, then you drive trick cars from across the pond"—nodding at the cream Vauxhall—"and spend your days pursuing beautiful telegraph operators. But I take it that you're broke, and have just wired for money, and are waiting for the more or less doubtful results. Is that it?"

"It is," Steve answered absent-mindedly. So the dandy in gray was named Larry Ormsby and was the factory owner's son.

The thin man drew in his feet and stood up on them.

"In that case it's lunchtime, and my name is Roy Kamp, and I'm hungry, and I don't like to eat alone, and I'd be glad to have you face the greasy dangers of a meal at the Finn's with me."

Steve got up and held out his hand.

"I'll be glad to," he said. "The coffee I had for breakfast could stand company. My name's Steve Threefall."

They shook hands, and started up the street together. Coming toward them were two men in earnest conversation; one of them was the beefy man whose face Larry Ormsby had slapped. Steve waited until they had passed, and then questioned Kamp casually:

"And who are those prominent-looking folks?"

"The little round one in the checkered college-boy suit is Conan Elder, real estate, insurance, and securities. The Wallingford-looking personage at his side is W. W. himself—the town's founder, owner, and whatnot—W. W. Ormsby, the Hon. Larry's papa."

The scene in the office, with its slapping of a face and flourish of a pistol, had been a family affair, then; a matter between father and son, with the son in the more forcible rôle. Steve, walking along with scant attention just now for the words Kamp's baritone voice was saying, felt a growing dissatisfaction in the memory of the girl and Larry Ormsby talking over the counter with their heads close together.

The Finn's lunchroom was little more than a corridor squeezed in between a poolroom and a hardware store, of barely sufficient width for a counter and a row of revolving stools. Only one customer was there when the two men entered. "Hello, Mr. Rymer," said Kamp.

"How are you, Mr. Kamp?" the man at the counter said, and as he turned his head toward them, Steve saw that he was blind. His large blue eyes were filmed over with a gray curtain which gave him the appearance of having dark hollows instead of eyes.

He was a medium-sized man who looked seventy, but there was a suggestion of fewer years in the suppleness of his slender white hands. He had a thick mane of white hair about a face that was crisscrossed with wrinkles, but it was a calm face, the face of a man at peace with his world. He was just finishing his meal, and left shortly, moving to the door with the slow accuracy of the blind man in familiar surroundings.

"Old man Rymer," Kamp told Steve, "lives in a shack behind where the new fire house is going to be, all alone. Supposed to have tons of gold coins under his floor—thus local gossip. Some day we're going to find him all momicked up. But he won't listen to reason. Says nobody would hurt him. Says that in a town as heavy with assorted thugs as this!"

"A tough town, is it?" Steve asked.

“Couldn’t help being! It’s only three years old—and a desert boom town draws the tough boys.”

Kamp left Steve after their meal, saying he probably would run across him later in the evening, and suggesting that there were games of a sort to be found in the next-door poolroom.

“I’ll see you there then,” Steve said, and went back to the telegraph office. The girl was alone. “Anything for me?” he asked her.

She put a green check and a telegram on the counter and returned to her desk. The telegram read:

> Collected bet. Paid Whiting two hundred for Ford.
> Sending balance six hundred forty. Shipping clothes.
> Watch your step.
>
> Harris.

“Did you send the wire collect, or do I owe—”

“Collect.” She did not look up.

Steve put his elbows on the counter and leaned over; his jaw, still exaggerated by its growth of hair, although he had washed the dirt from it, jutted forward with his determination to maintain a properly serious attitude until he had done this thing that had to be done.

“Now listen, Miss Vallance,” he said deliberately. “I was all kinds of a damned fool yesterday, and I’m sorrier than I can say. But, after all, nothing terrible happened, and—”

“Nothing terrible!” she exploded. “Is it nothing to be humiliated by being chased up and down the street like a rabbit by a drunken man with a dirty face in a worse car?”

“I wasn’t chasing you. I came back that second time to apologize. But, anyway”—in the uncomfortable face of her uncompromising hostility his determination to be serious went for nothing, and he relapsed into his accustomed defensive mockery—“no matter how scared you were you ought to accept my apology now and let bygones be bygones.”

“Scared? Why—”

“I wish you wouldn’t repeat words after me,” he complained. “This morning you did it, and now you’re at it again. Don’t you ever think of anything to say on your own account?”

She glared at him, opened her mouth, shut it with a little click. Her angry face bent sharply over the papers on the desk, and she began to add a column of figures.

Steve nodded with pretended approval, and took his check across the street to the bank.

The only man in sight in the bank when Steve came in was a little plump fellow with carefully trimmed salt-and-pepper whiskers hiding nearly all of a jovial round face except the eyes—shrewd, friendly eyes.

This man came to the window in the grille, and said: “Good afternoon. Can I do something for you?”

Steve laid down the telegraph company’s check. “I want to open an account.”

The banker picked up the slip of green paper and flicked it with a fat finger. “You are the gentleman who assaulted my wall with an automobile yesterday?”

Steve grinned. The banker’s eyes twinkled, and a smile ruffled his whiskers. “Are you going to stay in Izzard?”

“For a while.”

“Can you give me references?” the banker asked.

“Maybe Judge Denvir or Marshal Fernie will put in a word for me,” Steve said. “But if you’ll write the Seaman’s Bank in San Francisco they’ll tell you that so far as they know I’m all right.”

The banker stuck a plump hand through the window in the grille.

“I’m very glad to make your acquaintance. My name is David Brackett, and anything I can do to help you get established—call on me.”

Outside of the bank ten minutes later, Steve met the huge marshal, who stopped in front of him. “You still here?” Fernie asked.

“I’m an Izzardite now,” Steve said. “For a while, anyhow. I like your hospitality.”

“Don’t let old man Denvir see you coming out of a bank,” Fernie advised him, “or he’ll soak you plenty next time.”

“There isn’t going to be any next time.”

“There always is—in Izzard,” the marshal said enigmatically as he got his bulk in motion again.

That night, shaved and bathed, though still wearing his bleached khaki, Steve, with his black stick beside him, played stud poker with Roy Kamp and four factory workers. They played in the poolroom next door to the Finn’s lunchroom. Izzard apparently was a wide-open town. Twelve tables given to craps, poker, red dog, and twenty-one occupied half of the poolroom, and white-hot liquor was to be had at the cost of fifty cents and a raised finger. There was nothing surreptitious about the establishment; obviously its proprietor—a bullet-headed Italian whose customers called him “Gyp”—was in favor with the legal powers of Izzard.

The game in which Steve sat went on smoothly and swiftly, as play does when adepts participate. Though, as most games are, always potentially crooked, it was, in practice, honest. The six men at the table were, without exception, men who knew their way around—men who played quietly and watchfully, winning and losing without excitement or inattention. Not one of the six—except Steve, and perhaps Kamp—would have hesitated to favor himself at the expense of honesty had the opportunity come to him; but where knowledge of trickery is evenly distributed honesty not infrequently prevails.

Larry Ormsby came into the poolroom at a little after eleven and sat at a table some distance from Steve. Faces he had seen in the street during the day were visible through the smoke. At five minutes to twelve the four factory men at Steve’s table left for work—they were in the “graveyard” shift—and the game broke up with their departure. Steve, who had kept about even throughout the play, found that he had won something less than ten dollars; Kamp had won fifty-some.

Declining invitations to sit in another game, Steve and Kamp left together, going out into the dark and night-cool street, where the air was sweet after the smoke and alcohol of the poolroom. They walked slowly down the dim thoroughfare toward the Izzard Hotel, neither in a hurry to end their first evening together; for each knew by now that the unpainted bench in front of the telegraph office had

given him a comrade. Not a thousand words had passed between the two men, but they had as surely become brothers-in-arms as if they had tracked a continent together.

Strolling thus, a dark doorway suddenly vomited men upon them.

Steve rocked back against a building front from a blow on his head, arms were around him, the burning edge of a knife blade ran down his left arm. He chopped his black stick up into a body, freeing himself from encircling grip. He used the moment's respite this gave him to change his grasp on the stick; so that he held it now horizontal, his right hand grasping its middle, its lower half flat against his forearm, its upper half extending to the left.

He put his left side against the wall, and the black stick became a whirling black arm of the night. The knob darted down at a man's head. The man threw an arm up to fend the blow. Spinning back on its axis, the stick reversed—the ferruled end darted up under warding arm, hit jaw-bone with a click, and no sooner struck than slid forward, jabbing deep into throat. The owner of that jaw and throat turned his broad, thick-featured face to the sky, went backward out of the fight, and was lost to sight beneath the curbing.

Kamp, struggling with two men in the middle of the sidewalk, broke loose from them, whipped out a gun; but before he could use it his assailants were on him again.

Lower half of stick against forearm once more, Steve whirled in time to take the impact of a blackjack-swinging arm upon it. The stick spun sidewise with thud of knob on temple—spun back with loaded ferrule that missed opposite temple only because the first blow had brought its target down on knees. Steve saw suddenly that Kamp had gone down. He spun his stick and battered a passage to the thin man, kicked a head that bent over the prone, thin form, straddled it; and the ebony stick whirled swifter in his hand—spun as quarter-staves once spun in Sherwood Forest. Spun to the clicking tune of wood on bone, on metal weapons; to the duller rhythm of wood on flesh. Spun never in full circles, but always in short arcs—one end's recovery from a blow adding velocity to the other's stroke. Where an instant ago knob had swished from left to right, now weighted ferrule struck from right to left—struck under upthrown arms, over low-thrown arms—put into space a forty-inch sphere, whose radii were whirling black flails.

Behind his stick that had become a living part of him, Steve Threefall knew happiness—that rare happiness which only the expert ever finds—the joy in doing a thing that he can do supremely well. Blows he took—blows that shook him, staggered him—but he scarcely noticed them. His whole consciousness was in his right arm and the stick it spun. A revolver, tossed from a smashed hand, exploded ten feet over his head, a knife tinkled like a bell on the brick sidewalk, a man screamed as a stricken horse screams.

As abruptly as it had started, the fight stopped. Feet thudded away, forms vanished into the more complete darkness of a side street; and Steve was standing alone—alone except for the man stretched out between his feet and the other man who lay still in the gutter.

Kamp crawled from beneath Steve's legs and scrambled briskly to his feet.

"Your work with a bat is what you might call adequate," he drawled.

Steve stared at the thin man. This was the man he had accepted on an evening's acquaintance as a comrade! A man who lay on the street and let his companion do the fighting for both. Hot words formed in Steve's throat.

"You—"

The thin man's face twisted into a queer grimace, as if he were listening to faint, far-off sounds. He caught his hands to his chest, pressing the sides together. Then he turned half around, went down on one knee, went over backward with a leg bent over him.

"Get—word—to—"

The fourth word was blurred beyond recognition. Steve knelt beside Kamp, lifted his head from the bricks, and saw that Kamp's thin body was ripped open from throat to waistline.

"Get—word—to—" The thin man tried desperately to make the last word audible.

A hand gripped Steve's shoulder.

"What the hell's all this?" The roaring voice of Marshal Grant Fernie blotted out Kamp's words.

"Shut up a minute!" Steve snapped, and put his ear again close to Kamp's mouth.

But now the dying man could achieve no articulate sound. He tried with an effort that bulged his eyes; then he shuddered horribly, coughed, the slit in his chest gaped open, and he died.

"What's all this?" the marshal repeated.

"Another reception committee," Steve said bitterly, easing the dead body to the sidewalk, and standing up. "There's one of them in the street; the others beat it around the corner."

He tried to point with his left hand, then let it drop to his side. Looking at it, he saw that his sleeve was black with blood.

The marshal bent to examine Kamp, grunted, "He's dead, all right," and moved over to where the man Steve had knocked into the gutter lay.

"Knocked out," the marshal said, straightening up; "but he'll be coming around in a while. How'd you make out?"

"My arm's slashed, and I've got some sore spots, but I'll live through it."

Fernie took hold of the wounded arm.

"Not bleeding so bad," he decided. "But you better get it patched up. Doc MacPhail's is only a little way up the street. Can you make it, or do you want me to give you a lift?"

"I can make it. How do I find the place?"

"Two blocks up this street, and four to the left. You can't miss it—it's the only house in town with flowers in front of it. I'll get in touch with you when I want you."

Steve Threefall found Dr. MacPhail's house without difficulty—a two-story building set back from the street, behind a garden that did its best to make up a floral profusion for Izzard's general barrenness. The fence was hidden under twining virgin's bower, clustered now with white blossoms, and the narrow walk wound through roses, trillium, poppies, tulips, and geraniums that were ghosts in

the starlight. The air was heavily sweet with the fragrance of saucerlike moon flowers, whose vines covered the doctor's porch.

Two steps from the latter Steve stopped, and his right hand slid to the middle of his stick. From one end of the porch had come a rustling, faint but not of the wind, and a spot that was black between vines had an instant before been paler, as if framing a peeping face.

"Who is—" Steve began, and went staggering back.

From the vine-blackened porch a figure had flung itself on his chest.

"Mr. Threefall," the figure cried in the voice of the girl of the telegraph office, "there's somebody in the house!"

"You mean a burglar?" he asked stupidly, staring down into the small white face that was upturned just beneath his chin.

"Yes! He's upstairs—in Dr. MacPhail's room!"

"Is the doctor up there?"

"No, no! He and Mrs. MacPhail haven't come home yet."

He patted her soothingly on a velvet-coated shoulder, selecting a far shoulder, so that he had to put his arm completely around her to do the patting.

"We'll fix that," he promised. "You stick here in the shadows, and I'll be back as soon as I have taken care of our friend."

"No, no!" She clung to his shoulder with both hands. "I'll go with you. I couldn't stay here alone; but I won't be afraid with you."

He bent his head to look into her face, and cold metal struck his chin, clicking his teeth together. The cold metal was the muzzle of a big nickel-plated revolver in one of the hands that clung to his shoulder.

"Here, give me that thing," he exclaimed; "and I'll let you come with me."

She gave him the gun and he put it in his pocket.

"Hold on to my coat-tails," he ordered; "keep as close to me as you can, and when I say 'Down,' let go, drop flat to the floor, and stay there."

Thus, the girl whispering guidance to him, they went through the door she had left open, into the house, and mounted to the second floor. From their right, as they stood at the head of the stairs, came cautious rustlings.

Steve put his face down until the girl's hair was on his lips.

"How do you get to that room?" he whispered.

"Straight down the hall. It ends there."

They crept down the hall. Steve's outstretched hand touched a doorframe.

"Down!" he whispered to the girl.

Her fingers released his coat. He flung the door open, jumped through, slammed it behind him. A head-sized oval was black against the gray of a window. He spun his stick at it. Something caught the stick overhead; glass crashed, showering him with fragments. The oval was no longer visible against the window. He wheeled to the left, flung out an arm toward a sound of motion. His fingers found a neck—a thin neck with skin as dry and brittle as paper.

A kicking foot drove into his shin just below the knee. The paperish neck slid out of his hand. He dug at it with desperate fingers, but his fingers, weakened by the wound in his forearm, failed to hold. He dropped his stick and flashed his right hand to the left's assistance. Too late. The weakened hand had fallen away from the paperish neck, and there was nothing for the right to clutch.

A misshapen blot darkened the center of an open window, vanished with a thud of feet on the roof of the rear porch. Steve sprang to the window in time to see the burglar scramble up from the ground, where he had slid from the porch roof, and make for the low back fence. One of Steve's legs was over the sill when the girl's arms came around his neck.

"No, no!" she pleaded. "Don't leave me! Let him go!"

"All right," he said reluctantly, and then brightened.

He remembered the gun he had taken from the girl, got it out of his pocket as the fleeing shadow in the yard reached the fence; and as the shadow, one hand on the fence top, vaulted high over it, Steve squeezed the trigger. The revolver clicked. Again—another click. Six clicks, and the burglar was gone into the night.

Steve broke the revolver in the dark, and ran his fingers over the back of the cylinder—six empty chambers.

"Turn on the lights," he said brusquely.

When the girl had obeyed, Steve stepped back into the room and looked first for his ebony stick. That in his hand, he faced the girl. Her eyes were jet-black with excitement and pale lines of strain were around her mouth. As they stood looking into each other's eyes something of a bewilderment began to show through her fright. He turned away abruptly and gazed around the room.

The place had been ransacked thoroughly if not expertly. Drawers stood out, their contents strewn on the floor; the bed had been stripped of clothing, and pillows had been dumped out of their cases. Near the door a broken wall-light—the obstruction that had checked Steve's stick—hung crookedly. In the center of the floor lay a gold watch and half a length of gold chain. He picked them up and held them out to the girl.

"Dr. MacPhail's?"

She shook her head in denial before she took the watch, and then, examining it closely, she gave a little gasp. "It's Mr. Rymer's!"

"Rymer?" Steve repeated, and then he remembered. Rymer was the blind man who had been in the Finn's lunchroom, and for whom Kamp had prophesied trouble.

"Yes! Oh, I know something has happened to him!"

She put a hand on Steve's left arm.

"We've got to go see! He lives all alone, and if any harm has—"

She broke off, and looked down at the arm under her hand.

"Your arm! You're hurt!"

"Not as bad as it looks," Steve said. "That's what brought me here. But it has stopped bleeding. Maybe by the time we get back from Rymer's the doctor will be home."

They left the house by the back door, and the girl led him through dark streets and across darker lots. Neither of them spoke during the five-minute walk. The girl hurried at a pace that left her little breath for conversation, and Steve was occupied with uncomfortable thinking.

The blind man's cabin was dark when they reached it, but the front door was ajar. Steve knocked his stick against the frame, got no answer, and struck a match. Rymer lay on the floor, sprawled on his back, his arms outflung.

The cabin's one room was topsy-turvy. Furniture lay in upended confusion, clothing was scattered here and there, and boards had been torn from the floor. The girl knelt beside the unconscious man while Steve hunted for a light. Presently he found an oil lamp that had escaped injury, and got it burning just as Rymer's filmed eyes opened and he sat up. Steve righted an overthrown rocking-chair and, with the girl, assisted the blind man to it, where he sat panting. He had recognized the girl's voice at once, and he smiled bravely in her direction.

"I'm all right, Nova," he said; "not hurt a bit. Someone knocked at the door, and when I opened it I heard a swishing sound in my ear—and that was all I knew until I came to to find you here."

He frowned with sudden anxiety, got to his feet, and moved across the room. Steve pulled a chair and an upset table from his path, and the blind man dropped on his knees in a corner, fumbling beneath the loosened floor boards. His hands came out empty, and he stood up with a tired droop to his shoulders. "Gone," he said softly.

Steve remembered the watch then, took it from his pocket, and put it into one of the blind man's hands.

"There was a burglar at our house," the girl explained. "After he had gone we found that on the floor. This is Mr. Threefall."

The blind man groped for Steve's hand, pressed it, then his flexible fingers caressed the watch, his face lighting up happily.

"I'm glad," he said, "to have this back—gladder than I can say. The money wasn't so much—less than three hundred dollars. I'm not the Midas I'm said to be. But this watch was my father's."

He tucked it carefully into his vest, and then, as the girl started to straighten up the room, he remonstrated.

"You'd better run along home, Nova; it's late, and I'm all right. I'll go to bed now, and let the place go as it is until to-morrow."

The girl demurred, but presently she and Steve were walking back to the MacPhails' house, through the black streets; but they did not hurry now. They walked two blocks in silence, Steve looking ahead into dark space with glum thoughtfulness, the girl eyeing him covertly.

"What is the matter?" she asked abruptly.

Steve smiled pleasantly down at her.

"Nothing. Why?"

"There is," she contradicted him. "You're thinking of something unpleasant, something to do with me."

He shook his head.

"That's wrong, wrong on the face of it—they don't go together."

But she was not to be put off with compliments. "You're—you're—" She stood still in the dim street, searching for the right word.

"You're on your guard—you don't trust me—that's what it is!"

Steve smiled again, but with narrowed eyes. This reading of his mind might have been intuitive, or it might have been something else.

He tried a little of the truth:

"Not distrustful—just wondering. You know you did give me an empty gun to go after the burglar with, and you know you *wouldn't* let me chase him."

Her eyes flashed, and she drew herself up to the last inch of her slender five feet.

"So you think—" she began indignantly. Then she drooped toward him, her hands fastening upon the lapels of his coat. "Please, please, Mr. Threefall, you've got to believe that I didn't know the revolver was empty. It was Dr. MacPhail's. I took it when I ran out of the house, never dreaming that it wasn't loaded. And as for not letting you chase the burglar—I was afraid to be left alone again. I'm a little coward. I—I—Please believe in me, Mr. Threefall. Be friends with me. I need friends. I—"

Womanhood had dropped from her. She pleaded with the small white face of a child of twelve—a lonely, frightened child. And because his suspicions would not capitulate immediately to her appeal, Steve felt dumbly miserable, with an obscure shame in himself, as if he were lacking in some quality he should have had.

She went on talking, very softly, so that he had to bend his head to catch the words. She talked about herself, as a child would talk.

"It's been terrible! I came here three months ago because there was a vacancy in the telegraph office. I was suddenly alone in the world, with very little money, and telegraphy was all I knew that could be capitalized. It's been terrible here! The town—I can't get accustomed to it. It's so bleak. No children play in the streets. The people are different from those I've known—cruder, more brutal. Even the houses—street after street of them without curtains in the windows, without flowers. No grass in the yards, no trees.

"But I had to stay—there was nowhere else to go. I thought I could stay until I had saved a little money—enough to take me away. But saving money takes so long. Dr. MacPhail's garden has been like a piece of paradise to me. If it hadn't been for that I don't think I could have—I'd have gone crazy! The doctor and his wife have been nice to me; some people have been nice to me, but most of them are people I can't understand. And not all have been nice. At first it was awful. Men would say things, and women would say things, and when I was afraid of them they thought I was stuck up. Larry—Mr. Ormsby—saved me from that. He made them let me alone, and he persuaded the MacPhails to let me live with them. Mr. Rymer has helped me, too, given me courage; but I lose it again as soon as I'm away from the sight of his face and the sound of his voice.

"I'm scared—scared of everything! Of Larry Ormsby especially! And he's been wonderfully helpful to me. But I can't help it. I'm afraid of him—of the way he looks at me sometimes, of things he says when he has been drinking. It's as if there was something inside of him waiting for something. I shouldn't say that—because I owe him gratitude for—But I'm so afraid! I'm afraid of every person, of every house, of every doorstep even. It's a nightmare!"

Steve found that one of his hands was cupped over the white cheek that was not flat against his chest, and that his other arm was around her shoulders, holding her close.

"New towns are always like this, or worse," he began to tell her. "You should have seen Hopewell, Virginia, when the Du Ponts first opened it. It takes time for the undesirables who come with the first rush to be weeded out. And, stuck out here in the desert, Izzard would naturally fare a little worse than the average new

town. As for being friends with you—that's why I stayed here instead of going back to Whitetufts. We'll be great friends. We'll—"

He never knew how long he talked, or what he said; though he imagined afterward that he must have made a very long-winded and very stupid speech. But he was not talking for the purpose of saying anything; he was talking to soothe the girl, and to keep her small face between his hand and chest, and her small body close against his for as long a time as possible.

So, he talked on and on and on—

The MacPhails were at home when Nova Vallance and Steve came through the flowered yard again, and they welcomed the girl with evident relief. The doctor was a short man with a round bald head, and a round jovial face, shiny and rosy except where a sandy mustache drooped over his mouth. His wife was perhaps ten years younger than he, a slender blond woman with much of the feline in the set of her blue eyes and the easy grace of her movements.

"The car broke down with us about twenty miles out," the doctor explained in a mellow rumbling voice with a hint of a burr lingering around the r's. "I had to perform a major operation on it before we could get going again. When we got home we found you gone, and were just about to rouse the town."

The girl introduced Steve to the MacPhails, and then told them about the burglar, and of what they had found in the blind man's cabin.

Dr. MacPhail shook his round naked head and clicked his tongue on teeth. "Seems to me Fernie doesn't do all that could be done to tone Izzard down," he said.

Then the girl remembered Steve's wounded arm, and the doctor examined, washed, and bandaged it.

"You won't have to wear the arm in a sling," he said, "if you take a reasonable amount of care of it. It isn't a deep cut, and fortunately it went between the supinator longus and the great palmar without injury to either. Get it from our burglar?"

"No. Got it in the street. A man named Kamp and I were walking toward the hotel to-night and were jumped. Kamp was killed. I got this."

An asthmatic clock somewhere up the street was striking three as Steve passed through the MacPhails' front gate and set out for the hotel again. He felt tired and sore in every muscle, and he walked close to the curb.

"If anything else happens to-night," he told himself, "I'm going to run like hell from it. I've had enough for one evening."

At the first cross-street he had to pause to let an automobile race by. As it passed him he recognized it—Larry Ormsby's cream Vauxhall. In its wake sped five big trucks, with a speed that testified to readjusted gears. In a roar of engines, a cloud of dust, and a rattling of windows, the caravan vanished toward the desert.

Steve went on toward the hotel, thinking. The factory worked twenty-four hours a day, he knew; but surely no necessity of niter manufacturing would call for such excessive speed in its trucks—if they were factory trucks. He turned into Main Street and faced another surprise. The cream Vauxhall stood near the corner, its owner at the wheel. As Steve came abreast of it Larry Ormsby let its near door swing open, and held out an inviting hand.

Steve stopped and stood by the door.

"Jump in and I'll give you a lift as far as the hotel."

"Thanks."

Steve looked quizzically from the man's handsome, reckless face to the now dimly lighted hotel, less than two blocks away. Then he looked at the man again, and got into the automobile beside him.

"I hear you're a more or less permanent fixture among us," Ormsby said, proffering Steve cigarettes in a lacquered leather case, and shutting off his idling engine.

"For a while."

Steve declined the cigarettes and brought out tobacco and papers from his pocket, adding, "There are things about the place I like."

"I also hear you had a little excitement to-night."

"Some," Steve admitted, wondering whether the other meant the fight in which Kamp had been killed, the burglary at the MacPhails', or both.

"If you keep up the pace you've set," the factory owner's son went on, "it won't take you long to nose me out of my position as Izzard's brightest light."

Tautening nerves tickled the nape of Steve's neck. Larry Ormsby's words and tones seemed idle enough, but underneath them was a suggestion that they were not aimless—that they were leading to some definite place. It was not likely that he had circled around to intercept Steve merely to exchange meaningless chatter with him. Steve, lighting his cigarette, grinned and waited.

"The only thing I ever got from the old man, besides money," Larry Ormsby was saying, "is a deep-rooted proprietary love for my own property. I'm a regular burgher for insisting that my property is mine and must stay mine. I don't know exactly how to feel about a stranger coming in and making himself the outstanding black sheep of the town in two days. A reputation—even for recklessness—is property, you know; and I don't feel that I should give it up—*or any other rights*—without a struggle."

There it was. Steve's mind cleared. He disliked subtleties. But now he knew what the talk was about. He was being warned to keep away from Nova Vallance.

"I knew a fellow once in Onehunga," he drawled, "who thought he owned all of the Pacific south of the Tropic of Capricorn—and had papers to prove it. He'd been that way ever since a Maori bashed in his head with a stone mele. Used to accuse us of stealing our drinking water from his ocean."

Larry Ormsby flicked his cigarette into the street and started the engine.

"But the point is"—he was smiling pleasantly—"that a man is moved to protect what he thinks belongs to him. He may be wrong, of course, but that wouldn't affect the—ah—vigor of his protecting efforts."

Steve felt himself growing warm and angry.

"Maybe you're right," he said slowly, with deliberate intent to bring this thing between them to a crisis, "but I've never had enough experience with property to know how I'd feel about being deprived of it. But suppose I had a—well, say—a white vest that I treasured. And suppose a man slapped my face and threatened to spoil the vest. I reckon I'd forget all about protecting the vest in my hurry to tangle with him."

Larry laughed sharply.

Steve caught the wrist that flashed up, and pinned it to Ormsby's side with a hand that much spinning of a heavy stick had muscled with steel.

"Easy," he said into the slitted, dancing eyes; "easy now."

Larry Ormsby's white teeth flashed under his mustache.

"Righto," he smiled. "If you'll turn my wrist loose, I'd like to shake hands with you—a sort of ante-bellum gesture. I like you, Threefall; you're going to add materially to the pleasures of Izzard."

In his room on the third floor of the Izzard Hotel, Steve Threefall undressed slowly, hampered by a stiff left arm and much thinking. Matter for thought he had in abundance. Larry Ormsby slapping his father's face and threatening him with an automatic; Larry Ormsby and the girl in confidential conversation; Kamp dying in a dark street, his last words lost in the noise of the marshal's arrival; Nova Vallance giving him an empty revolver, and persuading him to let a burglar escape; the watch on the floor and the looting of the blind man's savings; the caravan Larry Ormsby had led toward the desert; the talk in the Vauxhall, with its exchange of threats.

Was there any connection between each of these things and the others? Or were they simply disconnected happenings? If there was a connection—and the whole of that quality in mankind which strives toward simplification of life's phenomena, unification, urged him to belief in a connection—just what was it? Still puzzling, he got into bed; and then out again quickly. An uneasiness that had been vague until now suddenly thrust itself into his consciousness. He went to the door, opened and closed it. It was a cheaply carpentered door, but it moved easily and silently on well-oiled hinges.

"I reckon I'm getting to be an old woman," he growled to himself; "but I've had all I want to-night."

He blocked the door with the dresser, put his stick where he could reach it quickly, got into bed again, and went to sleep.

A pounding on the door awakened Steve at nine o'clock the next morning. The pounder was one of Fernie's subordinates, and he told Steve that he was expected to be present at the inquest into Kamp's death within an hour. Steve found that his wounded arm bothered him little; not so much as a bruised area on one shoulder—another souvenir of the fight in the street.

He dressed, ate breakfast in the hotel café, and went up to Ross Amthor's "undertaking parlor," where the inquest was to be held.

The coroner was a tall man with high, narrow shoulders and a sallow, puffy face, who sped proceedings along regardless of the finer points of legal technicality. Steve told his story; the marshal told his, and then produced a prisoner—a thick-set Austrian who seemingly neither spoke nor understood English. His throat and lower face were swathed in white bandages.

"Is this the one you knocked down?" the coroner asked.

Steve looked at as much of the Austrian's face as was visible above the bandages.

"I don't know. I can't see enough of him."

"This is the one I picked out of the gutter," Grant Fernie volunteered; "whether you knocked him there or not. I don't suppose you got a good look at him. But this is he all right."

Steve frowned doubtfully. “I’d know him,” he said, “if he turned his face up and I got a good look at him.”

“Take off some of his bandages so the witness can see him,” the coroner ordered. Fernie unwound the Austrian’s bandages, baring a bruised and swollen jaw.

Steve stared at the man. This fellow may have been one of his assailants, but he most certainly wasn’t the one he had knocked into the street. He hesitated. Could he have confused faces in the fight?

“Do you identify him?” the coroner asked impatiently.

Steve shook his head.

“I don’t remember ever seeing him.”

“Look here, Threefall”—the giant marshal scowled down at Steve—“this is the man I hauled out of the gutter—one of the men you said jumped you and Kamp. Now what’s the game? What’s the idea of forgetting?”

Steve answered slowly, stubbornly:

“I don’t know. All I know is that this isn’t the first one I hit, the one I knocked out. He was an American—had an American face. He was about this fellow’s size, but this isn’t he.”

The coroner exposed broken yellow teeth in a snarl, the marshal glowered at Steve, the jurors regarded him with frank suspicion. The marshal and the coroner withdrew to a far corner of the room, where they whispered together, casting frequent glances at Steve.

“All right,” the coroner told Steve when this conference was over; “that’s all.”

From the inquest Steve walked slowly back to the hotel, his mind puzzled by this newest addition to Izzard’s mysteries. What was the explanation of the certain fact that the man the marshal had produced at the inquest was not the man he had taken from the gutter the previous night? Another thought: the marshal had arrived immediately after the fight with the men who had attacked him and Kamp, had arrived noisily, drowning the dying man’s last words. That opportune arrival and the accompanying noise—were they accidental? Steve didn’t know; and because he didn’t know he strode back to the hotel in frowning meditation.

At the hotel he found that his bag had arrived from Whitetufts. He took it up to his room and changed his clothes. Then he carried his perplexity to the window, where he sat smoking cigarette after cigarette, staring into the alley below, his forehead knotted beneath his tawny hair. Was it possible that so many things should explode around one man in so short a time, in a small city of Izzard’s size, without there being a connection between them—and between them and him? And if he was being involved in a vicious maze of crime and intrigue, what was it all about? What had started it? What was the key to it? The girl?

Confused thoughts fell away from him. He sprang to his feet.

Down the other side of the alley a man was walking—a thick-set man in soiled blue—a man with bandaged throat and chin. What was visible of his face was the face Steve had seen turned skyward in the fight—the face of the man he had knocked out.

Steve sprang to the door, out of the room, down three flights of stairs, past the desk, and out of the hotel’s back door. He gained the alley in time to see a blue trouser-leg disappearing into a doorway in the block below. Thither he went.

The doorway opened into an office building. He searched the corridors, upstairs and down, and did not find the bandaged man. He returned to the ground floor and discovered a sheltered corner near the back door, near the foot of the stairs. The corner was shielded from the stairs and from most of the corridor by a wooden closet in which brooms and mops were kept. The man had entered through the rear of the building; he would probably leave that way; Steve waited.

Fifteen minutes passed, bringing no one within sight of his hiding-place. Then from the front of the building came a woman's soft laugh, and footsteps moved toward him. He shrank back in his dusky corner. The footsteps passed—a man and a woman laughing and talking together as they walked. They mounted the stairs. Steve peeped out at them, and then drew back suddenly, more in surprise than in fear of detection, for the two who mounted the stairs were completely engrossed in each other.

The man was Elder, the insurance and real-estate agent. Steve did not see his face, but the checkered suit on his round figure was unmistakable—"college-boy suit," Kamp had called it. Elder's arm was around the woman's waist as they went up the stairs, and her cheek leaned against his shoulder as she looked coquettishly into his face. The woman was Dr. MacPhail's feline wife.

"What next?" Steve asked himself, when they had passed from his sight. "Is the whole town wrong? What next, I wonder?"

The answer came immediately—the pounding of crazy footsteps directly over Steve's head—footsteps that might have belonged to a drunken man, or to a man fighting a phantom. Above the noise of heels on wooden floor, a scream rose—a scream that blended horror and pain into a sound that was all the more unearthly because it was unmistakably of human origin.

Steve bolted out of his corner and up the steps three at a time, pivoted into the second-floor corridor on the newel, and came face to face with David Brackett, the banker.

Brackett's thick legs were far apart, and he swayed on them. His face was a pallid agony above his beard. Big spots of beard were gone, as if torn out or burned away. From his writhing lips thin wisps of vapor issued.

"They've poisoned me, the damned—"

He came suddenly up on the tips of his toes, his body arched, and he fell stiffly backward, as dead things fall.

Steve dropped on a knee beside him, but he knew nothing could be done—knew Brackett had died while still on his feet. For a moment, as he crouched there over the dead man, something akin to panic swept Steve Threefall's mind clean of reason. Was there never to be an end to this piling of mystery upon mystery, of violence upon violence? He had the sensation of being caught in a monstrous net—a net without beginning or end, and whose meshes were slimy with blood. Nausea—spiritual and physical—gripped him, held him impotent. Then a shot crashed.

He jerked erect—sprang down the corridor toward the sound; seeking in a frenzy of physical activity escape from the sickness that had filled him.

At the end of the corridor a door was labeled ORMSBY NITER CORPORATION, W.W. ORMSBY, PRESIDENT. There was no need for hesitancy before deciding that

the shot had come from behind that label. Even as he dashed toward it, another shot rattled the door and a falling body thudded behind it.

Steve flung the door open—and jumped aside to avoid stepping on the man who lay just inside. Over by a window, Larry Ormsby stood facing the door, a black automatic in his hand. His eyes danced with wild merriment, and his lips curled in a tight-lipped smile. "Hello, Threefall," he said. "I see you're still keeping close to the storm centers."

Steve looked down at the man on the floor—W. W. Ormsby. Two bullet-holes were in the upper left-hand pocket of his vest. The holes, less than an inch apart, had been placed with a precision that left no room for doubting that the man was dead. Steve remembered Larry's threat to his father: "I'll spoil your vest!"

He looked up from killed to killer. Larry Ormsby's eyes were hard and bright; the pistol in his hand was held lightly, with the loose alertness peculiar to professional gunmen.

"This isn't a—ah—personal matter with you, is it?" he asked.

Steve shook his head; and heard the trampling of feet and a confusion of excited voices in the corridor behind him.

"That's nice," the killer was saying; "and I'd suggest that you—"

He broke off as men came into the office. Grant Fernie, the marshal, was one of them.

"Dead?" he asked, with a bare glance at the man on the floor.

"Rather," Larry replied.

"How come?"

Larry Ormsby moistened his lips, not nervously, but thoughtfully. Then he smiled at Steve, and told his story.

"Threefall and I were standing down near the front door talking, when we heard a shot. I thought it had been fired up here, but he said it came from across the street. Anyhow, we came up here to make sure—making a bet on it first; so Threefall owes me a dollar. We came up here, and just as we got to the head of the steps we heard another shot, and Brackett came running out of here with this gun in his hand."

He gave the automatic to the marshal, and went on: "He took a few steps from the door, yelled, and fell down. Did you see him out there?"

"I did," Fernie said.

"Well, Threefall stopped to look at him while I came on in here to see if my father was all right—and found him dead. That's all there is to it."

Steve went slowly down to the street after the gathering in the dead man's office had broken up, without having either contradicted or corroborated Larry Ormsby's fiction. No one had questioned him. At first he had been too astonished by the killer's boldness to say anything; and when his wits had resumed their functions, he had decided to hold his tongue for a while.

Suppose he had told the truth? Would it have helped justice? Would anything help justice in Izzard? If he had known what lay behind this piling-up of crime, he could have decided what to do; but he did not know—did not even know that there was anything behind it. So he had kept silent. The inquest would not be held until the following day—time enough to talk then, after a night's consideration.

He could not grasp more than a fragment of the affair at a time now; disconnected memories made a whirl of meaningless images in his brain. Elder and Mrs. MacPhail going up the stairs—to where? What had become of them? What had become of the man with the bandages on throat and jaw? Had those three any part in the double murder? Had Larry killed the banker as well as his father? By what chance did the marshal appear on the scene immediately after murder had been done?

Steve carried his jumbled thoughts back to the hotel, and lay across his bed for perhaps an hour. Then he got up and went to the Bank of Izzard, drew out the money he had there, put it carefully in his pocket, and returned to his hotel room to lie across the bed again.

Nova Vallance, nebulous in yellow crêpe, was sitting on the lower step of the MacPhails' porch when Steve went up the flowered walk that evening. She welcomed him warmly, concealing none of the impatience with which she had been waiting for him. He sat on the step beside her, twisting around a little for a better view of the dusky oval of her face.

"How is your arm?" she asked.

"Fine!" He opened and shut his left hand briskly. "I suppose you heard all about to-day's excitement?"

"Oh, yes! About Mr. Brackett's shooting Mr. Ormsby, and then dying with one of his heart attacks."

"Huh?" Steve demanded.

"But weren't you there?" she asked in surprise.

"I was, but suppose you tell me just what you heard."

"Oh, I've heard all sorts of things about it! But all I really know is what Dr. MacPhail, who examined both of them, said."

"And what was that?"

"That Mr. Brackett killed Mr. Ormsby—shot him—though nobody seems to know why; and then, before he could get out of the building, his heart failed him and he died."

"And he was supposed to have a bad heart?"

"Yes. Dr. MacPhail told him a year ago that he would have to be careful, that the least excitement might be fatal."

Steve caught her wrist in his hand.

"Think now," he commanded. "Did you ever hear Dr. MacPhail speak of Brackett's heart trouble until to-day?"

She looked curiously into his face, and a little pucker of bewilderment came between her eyes.

"No," she replied slowly. "I don't think so; but, of course, there was never any reason why he should have mentioned it. Why do you ask?"

"Because," he told her, "Brackett did *not* shoot Ormsby; and any heart attack that killed Brackett was caused by poison—some poison that burned his face and beard."

She gave a little cry of horror.

"You think—" She stopped, glanced furtively over her shoulder at the front door of the house, and leaned close to him to whisper: "Didn't—didn't you say that the man who was killed in the fight last night was named Kamp?"

"Yes."

"Well, the report, or whatever it was that Dr. MacPhail made of his examination, reads Henry Cumberpatch."

"You sure? Sure it's the same man?"

"Yes. The wind blew it off the doctor's desk, and when I handed it back to him, he made some joke"—she colored with a little laugh—"some joke about it nearly being your death certificate instead of your companion's. I glanced down at it then, and saw that it was for a man named Henry Cumberpatch. What does it all mean? What is—"

The front gate clattered open, and a man swayed up the walk. Steve got up, picked up his black stick, and stepped between the girl and the advancing man. The man's face came out of the dark. It was Larry Ormsby; and when he spoke his words had a drunken thickness to match the unsteadiness—not quite a stagger, but nearly so—of his walk.

"Lis'en," he said; "I'm dam' near—"

Steve moved toward him. "If Miss Vallance will excuse us," he said, "we'll stroll to the gate and talk."

Without waiting for a reply from either of them, Steve linked an arm through one of Ormsby's and urged him down the path. At the gate Larry broke away, pulling his arm loose and confronting Steve.

"No time for foolishness," he snarled. "Y' got to get out! Get out o' Izzard!"

"Yes?" Steve asked. "And why?"

Larry leaned back against the fence and raised one hand in an impatient gesture.

"Your lives are not worth a nickel—neither of you."

He swayed and coughed. Steve grasped him by the shoulder and peered into his face.

"What's the matter with you?"

Larry coughed again and clapped a hand to his chest, up near the shoulder.

"Bullet—up high—Fernie's. But I got him—the big tramp. Toppled him out a window—down like a kid divin' for pennies." He laughed shrilly, and then became earnest again. "Get the girl—beat it—now! Now! Now! Ten minutes'll be too late. They're comin'!"

"Who? What? Why?" Steve snapped. "Talk turkey! I don't trust you. I've got to have reasons."

"Reasons, my God!" the wounded man cried. "You'll get your reasons. You think I'm trying to scare you out o' town b'fore th' inquest." He laughed insanely. "Inquest! You fool! There won't be any inquest! There won't be any to-morrow—for Izzard! And you—"

He pulled himself sharply together and caught one of Steve's hands in both of his.

"Listen," he said. "I'll give it to you, but we're wasting time! But if you've got to have it—listen.

"Izzard is a plant! The whole damned town is queer. Booze—that's the answer. The man I knocked off this afternoon—the one you thought was my father—originated the scheme. You make soda niter by boiling the nitrate in tanks with heated coils. He got the idea that a niter plant would make a good front for a

moonshine factory. And he got the idea that if you had a whole town working together it'd be impossible for the game ever to fall down.

"You can guess how much money there is in this country in the hands of men who'd be glad to invest it in a booze game that was air-tight. Not only crooks, I mean, but men who consider themselves honest. Take your guess, whatever it is, and double it, and you still won't be within millions of the right answer. There are men with—But anyway, Ormsby took his scheme east and got his backing—a syndicate that could have raised enough money to build a dozen cities.

"Ormsby, Elder, and Brackett were the boys who managed the game. I was here to see that they didn't double-cross the syndicate; and then there's a flock of trusty lieutenants, like Fernie, and MacPhail, and Heman—he's postmaster—and Harker—another doctor, who got his last week—and Leslie, who posed as a minister. There was no trouble to getting the population we wanted. The word went around that the new town was a place where a crook would be safe so long as he did what he was told. The slums of all the cities of America, and half of 'em out of it, emptied themselves here. Every crook that was less than a step ahead of the police, and had car fare here, came and got cover.

"Of course, with every thug in the world blowing in here we had a lot of sleuths coming, too; but they weren't hard to handle, and if worse came to worst, we could let the law take an occasional man; but usually it wasn't hard to take care of the gumshoes. We have bankers, and ministers, and doctors, and postmasters, and prominent men of all sorts either to tangle the sleuths up with bum leads, or, if necessary, to frame them. You'll find a flock of men in the state pen who came here—most of them as narcotics agents or prohibition agents—and got themselves tied up before they knew what it was all about.

"God, there never was a bigger game! It couldn't flop—unless we spoiled it for ourselves. And that's what we've done. It was too big for us! There was too much money in it—it went to our heads! At first we played square with the syndicate. We made booze and shipped it out—shipped it in carload lots, in trucks, did everything but pipe it out, and we made money for the syndicate and for ourselves. Then we got the real idea—the big one! We kept on making the hooch; but we got the big idea going for our own profit. The syndicate wasn't in on that.

"First, we got the insurance racket under way. Elder managed that, with three or four assistants. Between them they became agents of half the insurance companies in the country, and they began to plaster Izzard with policies. Men who had never lived were examined, insured, and then killed—sometimes they were killed on paper, sometimes a real man who died was substituted, and there were times when a man or two was killed to order. It was soft! We had the insurance agents, the doctors, the coroner, the undertaker, and all the city officials. We had the machinery to swing any deal we wanted! You were with Kamp the night he was killed! That was a good one. He was an insurance company sleuth—the companies were getting suspicious. He came here and was foolish enough to trust his reports to the mail. There aren't many letters from strangers that get through the post office without being read. We read his reports, kept them, and sent phony ones out in their places. Then we nailed Mr. Kamp, and changed his name on the records to fit a policy in the very company he represented. A rare joke, eh?

"The insurance racket wasn't confined to men—cars, houses, furniture, everything you can insure was plastered. In the last census—by distributing the people we could count on, one in a house, with a list of five or six names—we got a population on the records of at least five times as many as are really here. That gave us room for plenty of policies, plenty of deaths, plenty of property insurance, plenty of everything. It gave us enough political influence in the county and state to strengthen our hands a hundred per cent, make the game safer.

"You'll find street after street of houses with nothing in them out of sight of the front windows. They cost money to put up, but we've made the money right along, and they'll show a wonderful profit when the clean-up comes.

"Then, after the insurance stunt was on its feet, we got the promotion game going. There's a hundred corporations in Izzard that are nothing but addresses on letterheads—but stock certificates and bonds have been sold in them from one end of these United States to the other. And they have bought goods, paid for them, shipped them out to be got rid of—maybe at a loss—and put in larger and larger orders until they've built up a credit with the manufacturers that would make you dizzy to total. Easy! Wasn't Brackett's bank here to give them all the financial references they needed? There was nothing to it; a careful building-up of credit until they reached the highest possible point. Then, the goods shipped out to be sold through fences, and—bingo! The town is wiped out by fire. The stocks of goods are presumably burned; the expensive buildings that the out-of-town investors were told about are presumably destroyed; the books and records are burned.

"What a killing! I've had a hell of a time stalling off the syndicate, trying to keep them in the dark about the surprise we're going to give them. They're too suspicious as it is for us to linger much longer. But things are about ripe for the blow-off—the fire that's to start in the factory and wipe out the whole dirty town—and next Saturday was the day we picked. That's the day when Izzard becomes nothing but a pile of ashes—and a pile of collectable insurance policies.

"The rank and file in town won't know anything about the finer points of the game. Those that suspect anything take their money and keep quiet. When the town goes up in smoke there will be hundreds of bodies found in the ruins—all insured—and there will be proof of the death of hundreds of others—likewise insured—whose bodies can't be found.

"There never was a bigger game! But it was too big for us! My fault—some of it—but it would have burst anyway. We always weeded out those who came to town looking too honest or too wise, and we made doubly sure that nobody who was doubtful got into the post office, railroad depot, telegraph office, or telephone exchange. If the railroad company or the telegraph or telephone company sent somebody here to work, and we couldn't make them see things the way we wanted them seen, we managed to make the place disagreeable for them—and they usually flitted elsewhere in a hurry.

"Then the telegraph company sent Nova here and I flopped for her. At first it was just that I liked her looks. We had all sorts of women here—but they were mostly all sorts—and Nova was something different. I've done my share of dirtiness in this world, but I've never been able to get rid of a certain fastidiousness in my taste for women. I—Well, the rest of them—Brackett, Ormsby, Elder, and the lot—were all

for giving Nova the works. But I talked them out of it. I told them to let her alone and I'd have her on the inside in no time. I really thought I could do it. She liked me, or seemed to, but I couldn't get any further than that. I didn't make any headway. The others got impatient, but I kept putting them off, telling them that everything would be fine, that if necessary I'd marry her, and shut her up that way. They didn't like it. It wasn't easy to keep her from learning what was going on—working in the telegraph office—but we managed it somehow.

"Next Saturday was the day we'd picked for the big fireworks. Ormsby gave me the call yesterday—told me flatly that if I didn't sew Nova up at once they were going to pop her. They didn't know how much she had found out, and they were taking no chances. I told him I'd kill him if he touched her, but I knew I couldn't talk them out of it. To-day the break came. I heard he had given the word that she was to be put out of the way to-night. I went to his office for a showdown. Brackett was there. Ormsby salved me along, denied he had given any order affecting the girl, and poured out drinks for the three of us. The drink looked wrong. I waited to see what was going to happen next. Brackett gulped his down. It was poisoned. He went outside to die, and I nailed Ormsby.

"The game has blown up! It was too rich for us. Everybody is trying to slit everybody else's throat. I couldn't find Elder—but Fernie tried to pot me from a window; and he's Elder's right-hand man. Or he was—he's a stiff now. I think this thing in my chest is the big one—I'm about—But you can get the girl out. You've got to! Elder will go through with the play—try to make the killing for himself. He'll have the town touched off to-night. It's now or never with him. He'll try to—"

A shriek cut through the darkness.

"Steve! *Steve!! Steve!!!*"

Steve whirled away from the gate, leaped through flower-beds, crossed the porch in a bound, and was in the house. Behind him Larry Ormsby's feet clattered. An empty hallway, an empty room, another. Nobody was in sight on the ground floor. Steve went up the stairs. A strip of golden light lay under a door. He went through the door, not knowing or caring whether it was locked or not. He simply hurled himself shoulder-first at it, and was in the room. Leaning back against a table in the center of the room, Dr. MacPhail was struggling with the girl. He was behind her, his arms around her, trying to hold her head still. The girl twisted and squirmed like a cat gone mad. In front of her Mrs. MacPhail poised an uplifted blackjack.

Steve flung his stick at the woman's white arm, flung it instinctively, without skill or aim. The heavy ebony struck arm and shoulder, and she staggered back. Dr. MacPhail, releasing the girl, dived at Steve's legs, got them, and carried him to the floor. Steve's fumbling fingers slid off the doctor's bald head, could get no grip on the back of his thick neck, found an ear, and gouged into the flesh under it.

The doctor grunted and twisted away from the digging fingers. Steve got a knee free—drove it at the doctor's face. Mrs. MacPhail bent over his head, raising the black leather billy she still held. He dashed an arm at her ankles, missed—but the down-crashing blackjack fell obliquely on his shoulder. He twisted away, scrambled to his knees and hands—and sprawled headlong under the impact of the doctor's weight on his back.

He rolled over, got the doctor under him, felt his hot breath on his neck. Steve raised his head and snapped it back—hard. Raised it again, and snapped it down, hammering MacPhail's face with the back of his skull. The doctor's arms fell away and Steve lurched upright to find the fight over.

Larry Ormsby stood in the doorway grinning evilly over his pistol at Mrs. MacPhail, who stood sullenly by the table. The blackjack was on the floor at Larry's feet.

Against the other side of the table the girl leaned weakly, one hand on her bruised throat, her eyes dazed and blank with fear. Steve went around to her.

"Get going, Steve! There's no time for playing. You got a car?" Larry Ormsby's voice was rasping.

"No," Steve said.

Larry cursed bitterly—an explosion of foul blasphemies. Then:

"We'll go in mine—it can outrun anything in the state. But you can't wait here for me to get it. Take Nova over to blind Rymer's shack. I'll pick you up there. He's the only one in town you can trust. Go ahead, damn you!" he yelled.

Steve glanced at the sullen MacPhail woman, and at her husband, now getting up slowly from the floor, his face blood-smeared and battered.

"How about them?"

"Don't worry about them," Larry said. "Take the girl and make Rymer's place. I'll take care of this pair and be over there with the car in fifteen minutes. Get going!"

Steve's eyes narrowed and he studied the man in the doorway. He didn't trust him, but since all Izzard seemed equally dangerous, one place would be as safe as another—and Larry Ormsby might be honest this time.

"All right," he said, and turned to the girl. "Get a heavy coat."

Five minutes later they were hurrying through the same dark streets they had gone through on the previous night. Less than a block from the house, a muffled shot came to their ears, and then another. The girl glanced quickly at Steve but did not speak. He hoped she had not understood what the two shots meant.

They met nobody. Rymer had heard and recognized the girl's footsteps on the sidewalk, and he opened the door before they could knock.

"Come in, Nova," he welcomed her heartily, and then fumbled for Steve's hand. "This is Mr. Threefall, isn't it?"

He led them into the dark cabin, and then lighted the oil lamp on the table. Steve launched at once into a hurried summarizing of what Larry Ormsby had told him. The girl listened with wide eyes and wan face; the blind man's face lost its serenity, and he seemed to grow older and tired as he listened.

"Ormsby said he would come after us with his car," Steve wound up. "If he does, you will go with us, of course, Mr. Rymer. If you'll tell us what you want to take with you we'll get it ready; so that there will be no delay when he comes—if he comes." He turned to the girl. "What do you think, Nova? Will he come? And can we trust him if he does?"

"I—I hope so—he's not all bad, I think."

The blind man went to a wardrobe in the room's other end.

"I've got nothing to take," he said, "but I'll get into warmer clothes."

He pulled the wardrobe door open, so that it screened a corner of the room for him to change in. Steve went to a window, and stood there looking between blind

and frame, into the dark street where nothing moved. The girl stood close to him, between his arm and side, her fingers twined in his sleeve.

"Will we—? Will we—?"

He drew her closer and answered the whispered question she could not finish.

"We'll make it," he said, "if Larry plays square, or if he doesn't. We'll make it."

A rifle cracked somewhere in the direction of Main Street. A volley of pistol shots. The cream-colored Vauxhall came out of nowhere to settle on the sidewalk, two steps from the door. Larry Ormsby, hatless and with his shirt torn loose to expose a hole under one of his collar-bones, tumbled out of the car and through the door that Steve threw open for him.

Larry kicked the door shut behind him, and laughed.

"Izzard's frying nicely!" he cried, and clapped his hands together. "Come, come! The desert awaits!"

Steve turned to call the blind man. Rymer stepped out from behind his screening door. In each of Rymer's hands was a heavy revolver. The film was gone from Rymer's eyes.

His eyes, cool and sharp now, held the two men and the girl.

"Put your hands up, all of you," he ordered curtly.

Larry Ormsby laughed insanely.

"Did you ever see a damned fool do his stuff, Rymer?" he asked.

"Put your hands up!"

"Rymer," Larry said, "I'm dying now. To hell with you!"

And without haste he took a black automatic pistol from an inside coat pocket.

The guns in Rymer's hands rocked the cabin with explosion after explosion.

Knocked into a sitting position on the floor by the heavy bullets that literally tore him apart, Larry steadied his back against the wall, and the crisp, sharp reports of his lighter weapon began to punctuate the roars of the erstwhile blind man's guns.

Instinctively jumping aside, pulling the girl with him, at the first shot, Steve now hurled himself upon Rymer's flank. But just as he reached him the shooting stopped. Rymer swayed, the very revolvers in his hands seemed to go limp. He slid out of Steve's clutching hands—his neck scraping one hand with the brittle dryness of paper—and became a lifeless pile on the floor.

Steve kicked the dead man's guns across the floor a way, and then went over to where the girl knelt beside Larry Ormsby. Larry smiled up at Steve with a flash of white teeth.

"I'm gone, Steve," he said. "That Rymer—fooled us all—phony films on eyes—painted on—spy for rum syndicate."

He writhed, and his smile grew stiff and strained.

"Mind shaking hands, Steve?" he asked a moment later.

"You're a good guy, Larry," was the only thing he could think to say.

The dying man seemed to like that. His smile became real again.

"Luck to you—you can get a hundred and ten out of the Vauxhall," he managed to say.

And then, apparently having forgotten the girl for whom he had given up his life, he flashed another smile at Steve and died.

The front door slammed open—two heads looked in. The heads' owners came in.

Steve bounded upright, swung his stick. A bone cracked like a whip, a man reeled back holding a hand to his temple.

"Behind me—close!" Steve cried to the girl, and felt her hands on his back.

Men filled the doorway. An invisible gun roared and a piece of the ceiling flaked down. Steve spun his stick and charged the door. The light from the lamp behind him glittered and glowed on the whirling wood. The stick whipped backward and forward, from left to right, from right to left. It writhed like a live thing—seemed to fold upon its grasped middle as if spring-hinged with steel. Flashing half-circles merged into a sphere of deadliness. The rhythm of incessant thudding against flesh and clicking on bone became a tune that sang through the grunts of fighting men, the groans and oaths of stricken men. Steve and the girl went through the door.

Between moving arms and legs and bodies the cream of the Vauxhall showed. Men stood upon the automobile, using its height for vantage in the fight. Steve threw himself forward, swinging his stick against shin and thigh, toppling men from the machine. With his left hand he swept the girl around to his side. His body shook and rocked under the weight of blows from men who were packed too closely for any effectiveness except the smothering power of sheer weight.

His stick was suddenly gone from him. One instant he held and spun it; the next, he was holding up a clenched fist that was empty—the ebony had vanished as if in a puff of smoke. He swung the girl up over the car door, hammered her down into the car—jammed her down upon the legs of a man who stood there—heard a bone break, and saw the man go down. Hands gripped him everywhere; hands pounded him. He cried aloud with joy when he saw the girl, huddled on the floor of the car, working with ridiculously small hands at the car's mechanism.

The machine began to move. Holding with his hands, he lashed both feet out behind. Got them back on the step. Struck over the girl's head with a hand that had neither thought nor time to make a fist—struck stiff-fingered into a broad red face.

The car moved. One of the girl's hands came up to grasp the wheel, holding the car straight along a street she could not see. A man fell on her. Steve pulled him off—tore pieces from him—tore hair and flesh. The car swerved, scraped a building; scraped one side clear of men. The hands that held Steve fell away from him, taking most of his clothing with them. He picked a man off the back of the seat, and pushed him down into the street that was flowing past them. Then he fell into the car beside the girl.

Pistols exploded behind them. From a house a little ahead a bitter-voiced rifle emptied itself at them, sieving a mudguard. Then the desert—white and smooth as a gigantic hospital bed—was around them. Whatever pursuit there had been was left far behind.

Presently the girl slowed down, stopped.

"Are you all right?" Steve asked.

"Yes; but you're—"

"All in one piece," he assured her. "Let me take the wheel."

"No! No!" she protested. "You're bleeding. You're—"

"No! No!" he mocked her. "We'd better keep going until we hit something. We're not far enough from Izzard yet to call ourselves safe."

He was afraid that if she tried to patch him up he would fall apart in her hands. He felt like that.

She started the car, and they went on. A great sleepiness came to him. What a fight! What a fight!

“Look at the sky!” she exclaimed.

He opened his heavy eyes. Ahead of them, above them, the sky was lightening—from blue-black to violet, to mauve, to rose. He turned his head and looked back. Where they had left Izzard, a monstrous bonfire was burning, painting the sky with jeweled radiance.

“Goodbye, Izzard,” he said drowsily, and settled himself more comfortably in the seat.

He looked again at the glowing pink in the sky ahead.

“My mother has primroses in her garden in Delaware that look like that sometimes,” he said dreamily. “You’ll like ’em.”

His head slid over against her shoulder, and he went to sleep.