

The Suicide Coterie

by **Emile C. Tepperman, 1899-1951**

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Private Detective Taylor thought the assignment was only a routine bodyguard job. But in that tumbledown, gloomy hotel he found himself at the mercy of...
The Suicide Coterie.

I SPOTTED the hotel before Braden did. It was getting dark, and I guess his eyesight wasn't so good anyway, what with those thick-lensed glasses that seemed to make a gargoyle out of his soft round face. I slowed up the coupe and said: „Is that it, Mr. Braden?“

The cement road sloped upward here for about half a mile, and at the top of the slope lay this old, tumbledown summer hotel, dark except for a single room on the ground floor that seemed to be brightly lit.

Braden didn't answer my question. There was sweat on his forehead, which was a pretty bad sign, considering that it was about twenty above zero outside. January first is cold in up-state New York. I had noticed that he appeared to get more fidgety as we neared our destination.

I pushed down on the brake, pulled the coupe up to the side of the road and shut off the ignition. He turned a startled face to me.

„It-it’s a half mile farther, Taylor,“ he said. „W-why do you stop here?“

„I know it’s a half mile farther, Mr. Braden,“ I told him. „But I figure now is the time to get the low-down on this business. I’ve come a hundred miles with you without asking any questions. Here you bust in on me after I’ve just got back from a New Year’s eve celebration, and you hand me five hundred dollars to come along and be your bodyguard. You tell me you’ll give me the dope on the way up here, but so far you haven’t opened your mouth. Well, now is the time.“

Braden lowered his lids behind the thick lenses of the glasses, avoiding my gaze. His hands folded over his round paunch. He said:

„Yes, yes. I’ve been so upset, you know. And then, you’ve been so cold and businesslike. I just couldn’t bring myself—“

I shrugged. „I can see you’re down in the dumps about some thing. But it’s my idea, Mr. Braden, that a private detective is paid for getting his clients out of jams, not for wet-nursing them.“

He took a deep breath. „I’ll tell you the whole story, Taylor. There will be five men up there at the hotel. They are all dangerous men, particularly Joplin. You’ll know him from the others because he is tremendous, even taller than you are, Taylor, and brutally powerful. He is a giant of a man, and strong!“ Braden’s voice dropped almost to a whisper. „How strong!“

„Okay,“ I said. „I get you—Mr. Joplin is bad medicine. So far, so good. Now, what’s the setup? What’s your business with these five men, and what might they do to you that requires a five-hundred-dollar bodyguard?“

Braden fidgeted. He opened his coat, reached in to his hip pocket, took out a handkerchief. Then he took off his glasses, wiped them with the handkerchief. His small, nearsighted eyes kept blinking continuously. Finally he said:

„We meet here once a year, Taylor, on New Year’s Day. We have done this for seven years now.“

„Fine!“ I approved. „What are you, alumni of some college; or is it a freak bet?“ He was silent for a minute. Then he slowly repeated my last words, almost under his breath: „Freak bet—freak bet. Yes, you could almost call it that.“

He stared at me, studying me. „Suppose we do call it that, Taylor. A freak bet. That’s exactly it.“ He moved closer to me as if he were afraid of being overheard. „Your name was given to me, Taylor, by my bank, who said that you were a reliable private detective who was fast with a gun and could keep his mouth shut. All you have to do up there at the hotel is to protect me in case Joplin or any of the others should attempt to do me—harm.“

I knew a little about Braden because the Granger National Bank, for which I did some work, had called me after giving him my name. I had learned that Braden kept a very fluctuating balance, that he was a plunger on the Street. Five or six years ago he had been the head of the prosperous brokerage firm of Braden and Stanton, which had gone under in the crash. Since then he seemed to get funds in strange ways, always replenishing his balance at the bank right after the first of each year. The source of those fresh funds was always a mystery. This supplemented the little knowledge I had concerning him, which I recalled reading in the papers about a year ago: that his former partner, Frank Stanton, had committed suicide. There was something queer about the case, I remembered, but I just couldn’t put my finger on it at the moment. If Stanton’s

death hadn't been suicide, then, maybe Braden was afraid of the same thing... Braden was saying: „I have every confidence in you—“ But he stopped short because suddenly a pair of powerful headlights appeared behind us in the road, bathing my coupe in their brilliant glare. It came up abreast of us in no time and squealed to a stop alongside as the driver applied his brakes.

It was a big sedan, and there were two men in it. The driver was a small, pinch-faced chap, who wore a peaked cap.

The man next to him was the biggest man I have ever seen. He wore no hat, and his hair was black and cut close to his scalp. His neck bulged out over his coat collar and supported a broad head with a face that might have been carved out of oddly assorted pieces of wood. His eyes were far too small for the rest of him, and they looked dangerous, menacing in the semi-gloom.

This man opened the door and got out. Braden, white as a sheet beside me, seemed to have an attack of the jitters at sight of him. He whispered: „T-that's Joplin!“ His eyes were fixed on the huge figure which had now come up close to my window.

The big man's eyes flicked from me to Braden, and he stooped to peer in. „Well, Braden,“ he said in a deep, resonant voice, „I see you've come.“

Braden answered with a weak attempt at bluster, „Of course I've come, Joplin. What made you think I wouldn't?“ Joplin's face cracked into a weird sort of smile. He hunched. „Just a hunch I had.“ He jerked, his massive head at me. „Who's your friend?“

Braden gulped, tried to smile. „Why—why, he's my chauffeur. I've been so nervous of late, I find it hard driving long distances.“

Joplin took his face away from the window. „All right,“ he said, „get going. I'll be right behind you.“ I looked at Braden, who nodded. I shifted into first and got the car in motion. After I had got into high, I glanced in the rear-vision mirror and saw the huge figure of Joplin getting into his own car.

The sedan followed close behind us all the way up the hill to the driveway of the hotel. I was sore at myself for having been maneuvered into a position where I had to go on without knowing the rest of the story, but after getting a single glimpse of Braden's face, I could never have left him without reproaching myself for the rest of my life. So I contented myself with giving him a little warning.

„Remember, Braden,“ I said sternly, „I'm an honest private detective—even if you didn't know there were any of the species. I'm sticking with you as long as I'm convinced you're not breaking the law. The minute I find out you're a crook, I'm dropping you—and I won't give a damn where you fall.“

Braden said eagerly: „You won't regret it, Taylor. If I come out of this alive—“ He didn't finish telling me what he'd do if he came out alive, because at that moment Joplin and his pinch-faced driver came up alongside my coupe. Joplin boomed: „Well, what are you waiting for? The others are all here.“ He indicated a group of parked cars farther down along the driveway, past the portico.

Braden said hastily: „We're coming, Joplin. We're coming.“

The big man said carelessly to his driver, „Come on, Nick,“ and went ahead, followed by Nick, who threw us a sardonic glance in passing. We got out of the coupe, walked up the four wooden steps of the weather-beaten entrance. The lobby was now brilliantly lit. The desk was at the far end, and there was a big double door at the left, opening into a dining room.

Joplin was near the desk, talking to a swarthy man in evening dress, while Nick, the driver, had his elbows on the desk, watching us come through the door. Joplin towered more than a head above the swarthy man, who was no Lilliputian himself. The swarthy man was bowing deferentially, and Joplin was asking:

„Are the others all here, Curie?“

The swarthy man nodded, jerked his head toward the dining room. „They’ve been waiting for you and Braden before starting dinner.“

„Let them wait,“ Joplin said shortly. „Take us upstairs so we can wash.“ Then he lowered his voice, said something that I couldn’t hear. Curie’s eyes swung toward us, and I guessed that Joplin was telling him something about Braden and me.

Curie said, „Yes, sir, this way, sir,“ and went ahead across the lobby to a wide staircase.

Joplin swung slowly, looked from Braden to me. „Follow me, gentlemen. Nick, you come last.“ He said it significantly, and Nick grinned, took his elbows off the desk and put his hand in his overcoat pocket. There was a bulge in that pocket, and I knew Nick wanted us to see it.

Joplin was already up the stairs after Curie. I glanced at Braden, who gave me a sort of hopeless look, then turned and followed. I went after him, and Nick brought up the rear.

Curie put on a light in the upper corridor and showed Joplin and Braden to separate rooms, then took me to a third. Nick remained out in the corridor. Apparently he didn’t need to wash up.

The room that was assigned to me was a typical summer hotel bedroom: one bed, not too clean looking; one dresser, two chairs, one washstand. The washstand was in the corner alongside the window. There was a mirror in the wall above it, a small piece of guest soap next to the faucet and a dirty towel hanging in the rack below the mirror.

I said to Curie: „How about a clean towel?“

Curie was halfway out the door. He looked back, didn’t even crack a smile. „You’ll use that one,“ he said, closing the door behind him.

I shrugged, peeled off my coat and rolled up my sleeves. I needed a wash badly after the drive. What I could really have stood was a cold shower; for Braden had awakened me in the middle of a New Year’s Eve hangover sleep, and my innards seemed to be doing somersaults all around the lining of my stomach.

When I bent down over the basin, my shoulder holster, which was strapped on over my vest, got in the way. So I took it off and put it on the bed under my coat. Then I filled the basin full of cold water and ducked my head into it, keeping it there for a long, cool, refreshing minute.

I had just got through washing, and was pawing around for the towel, when I heard the door open. I found the towel, wiped my eyes and took a look.

It wasn’t the corridor door that had opened this time, but the connecting door leading from the next room. There was a woman standing in the doorway. She stood erect, slim, in a high-necked dress of some sort of green material that went perfectly with her long black hair, which was done up in a big knot at the back of her head. Her eyes were deep-black and flashing, and she was holding an automatic pointed straight at me.

I will swear that she had been on the point of shooting me in the back. I could see the sudden startled look of her when I took the towel away from my face; could see how she jerked that automatic up, away from the line with my stomach.

She said: „I—oh—I thought you were Jo—“ Then she stopped, put her hand to her mouth as if she had said too much.

I grinned. „Lady, I’m certainly glad I’m not!“ I said it fervently. If I had ever seen a beautiful lady intent on murder, she was it.

Abruptly, her little mouth hardened and her eyes flashed. „But you’re one of them, anyway—one of the six. Which are you? Gage, Vincent, Freeman—“

„Madam,“ I said hastily, „I’m none of them. My name is Taylor, and I’m a private detective.“

„Who brought you here?“ she asked swiftly.

I shut up. I was talking too much.

But she guessed. Her lips curled scornfully. „Of course, it must have been Braden. He knows—“

She shot a startled glance at the corridor door, for a knock had sounded there. Swiftly, without lost motion, she backed out into the next room, closed the door.

The knock sounded again, and the doorknob rattled. I called out, „Come in,“ and the door opened to admit Joplin.

He came across the room, staring at me steadily out of his narrow eyes. Then he glanced around suspiciously, asked: „Was anybody here just now?“

I said: „If they were, I wouldn’t have known. I had the water running. I almost didn’t hear you knock.“ He didn’t wait for my answer, but strode across and flung open the connecting door. I held my breath, expecting to hear the bark of that small automatic I had seen in the woman’s hand. But the room next door was empty. I watched while Joplin went through that room to the corridor door, opened it and called out:

„Did anybody come out of here just now, Nick?“

I heard Nick say: „Sure, boss—Mrs. Stanton. She went downstairs.“

Joplin grunted, came back through the connecting door and into my room again. If I had had a chance I would have dived for my gun under the coat on the bed. But I couldn’t; his eyes were on me all the time he was in the next room.

He came up close, towering over me, and rapped out: „What’s your name?“ The look on his wooden face wasn’t reassuring.

I said: „The name is Taylor, Mr. Joplin.“ I tried to make myself sound as much like a chauffeur as I could. At the same time I folded the towel I was holding, and started twisting it around. In case this bird started anything, a good wet towel, twisted around, would make a better weapon than a pair of fists. Joplin wasn’t dumb. His eyes dropped to the twisted towel, then raised to mine. He said:

„All right, Taylor. I know you’re not a chauffeur. You’re a private detective. Braden brought you along in case he got in trouble. Well, Taylor—“ he took a step forward, narrowing the distance between us—„I’ll give you a tip—keep your hands out of whatever happens here. I’m not asking whom you were just talking to—I know. If you want to get out of here alive, forget everything you may see. Don’t listen to Mrs. Stanton’s ravings, and don’t start anything. If you do—“ his voice got low and rumbling—„it will be—just—too—bad!“

He swung away from me, before I could answer him and covered the distance to the door in two long strides. I watched him go out, ducking his head to pass under the lintel, and slam the door behind him. He had talked like a man who was supremely sure of himself, as if he couldn't imagine any one standing up to him. My shoulder holster on again, I rolled down my sleeves and put on my coat. I couldn't get that woman with the automatic out of my head. I was thinking more of her than of Joplin's warning. Mrs. Stanton. Stanton had been Braden's partner. But she didn't seem to think much of Braden.

I shrugged, went out into the corridor. Nick was standing near the staircase with his eye on my door. He still had his hand on the bulge in his pocket. I paid him no attention, but went to the door of the room that had been assigned to Braden, and knocked. There was no answer.

From behind me Nick said: „Your friend's downstairs, pal.“

I always like to see for myself, so I pushed the door open, looked into the room. It was true. Braden wasn't there. I closed the door, started for the stairs.

I was about to pass Nick when he sidestepped in front of me, standing so that the bulge in his pocket was turned toward me. He grinned nastily.

„You and me is gonna stay up here, pal. There's things goin' on downstairs, and it's private—see?“

I looked him up and down. He seemed to be a pretty fast man, and he had the drop on me.

I said mildly: „Listen, Nicky, what's the gag? Why all the mystery?“

He kept that bulge poking out at me. „If you're smart, pal, you won't ask no questions—see?“ He was still grinning. „Just go back in your room and be a nice boy.“

I tried him on another tack. „But how about some eats? I've been driving all night, and I'm hungry.“

„No eats, pal. You'll be glad if the boss lets you outta here—hungry.“

I said: „Nicky, you should never try to stop a starving man.“ My left hand clamped over the hand in his pocket, twisted it sideways. At the same time I brought my right fist up in a short arc that caught him on the point of the chin. He was lifted off his feet, and he would have fallen down the stairs if I hadn't been holding on to him with the other hand.

Although I wasn't as big as Joplin, I could hit pretty hard. There was a glazed look in Nicky's eyes, and his knees wobbled and gave under him. I eased him slowly to the floor, took his hand out of his pocket, reached in and dug out the automatic. Nicky was out. I dragged him toward my room, trying to make as little noise as possible so as not to arouse the people downstairs. I didn't want to spoil their dinner—just yet.

I got Nicky inside the room, closed the door and dragged the sheet off the bed. I tore it into strips, turned Nicky over on his face and tied his hands and feet.

When I got down to the foot of the stairs, there was nobody in the lobby. From where I stood I could see the open double-doors of the dining room, past the clerk's desk, but I couldn't see inside. There were people in there all right, because I could hear the hum of voices and the subdued clatter of dishes.

I took a couple of steps across the floor, and the boards creaked under me I stopped short, holding Nicky's automatic handy; but the talking went on inside, so I kept going till I got close to the door. I peered inside.

A large table had been set in the middle of the room. Seven people sat around it. Joplin sat with his back to me, and his massive figure would have stood out in any gathering. At his right was Braden, whose profile, turned toward me, showed his face a pasty white. His fingers were fidgeting nervously with the tablecloth, and he was not eating the soup in front of him. There were four other men around the table, and they all seemed equally as nervous as Braden.

Mrs. Stanton, the woman who had come into my room with the gun, was the seventh person at the table. She was opposite Joplin, sitting quite still, listening to what the big man was saying. Her eyes never left his face.

„Gentlemen,“ I could hear Joplin say, „at this meeting we have two visitors. One of them is—believe it or not—a detective!“ The others all swung their eyes to Braden, who squirmed in his chair, seemed to shrink back into it. He looked around the table, raised a pudgy hand. „I—I d-didn't mean—“ Joplin threw him a sardonic side glance, waved his hand carelessly. „Don't bother to explain, Braden. We know exactly what you had in mind.“ He turned to the others. „The detective's presence needn't cause us any alarm, gentlemen. He is upstairs in his room, and Nick is watching the corridor. The detective won't bother us until we are ready to deal with him.“

I could see Braden sort of wilt. The news that I was taken care of was a body blow. It knocked his last prop from under him.

Joplin went on: „The other visitor—“ he bowed to the woman across the table—„is Mrs. Stanton, whom you all know. She is the widow of our very dear friend, Frank Stanton, who committed suicide last year, causing us all deep sorrow.“ His voice was unctuous, like an undertaker saying he was sorry about the death rate.

Mrs. Stanton didn't move, didn't take her eyes off him. I could see that her whole body was tense. She said in a low voice, colorless, as if she were talking about the weather:

„That's a lie, Joplin. Fred didn't commit suicide. He was murdered. You murdered him.“

There was a dead silence around the table. From the kitchen, at the far end, Curie came in, bearing a tray of food. They kept quiet while he served them. Not a word was spoken. But there was dynamite in the air.

Curie set his tray on an end table, went around collecting the soup plates and then laid other dishes before them. He did it efficiently, like a born waiter. Then he went back into the kitchen, reappeared in a moment with a tall bottle of wine that he carried carefully, reverently. From this he filled thin-stemmed glasses which stood beside each one's plate. My mouth was watering at sight of all that food and wine. I felt that if I didn't get something soon I'd collapse. As Curie stood next to Joplin, the big man motioned to him with his hand, whispered something in his ear. Curie's face did not change expression. He nodded and left the room.

It was not until he had gone into the kitchen that the conversation was resumed. It was Joplin himself who broke the tension caused by Mrs. Stanton's accusation. He said lightly, almost banteringly:

„I suppose you have good grounds for making such a statement, Mrs. Stanton? After all, we were Frank's best friends.“

The corners of Mrs. Stanton's little mouth turned down tight. She was talking to Joplin, and it was as if there wasn't anybody else at the table.

„I said you murdered him, Joplin—you and these others. There were once twelve of you who met here every New Year's. Each year you drew lots, and the unlucky man who got the deuce of spades had to commit suicide. You are each insured for a hundred thousand dollars. That is how you have been living for the past seven years—on the blood money that the insurance companies paid. Each year there are fewer of you to divide the money. You are ghouls!“ Her voice broke a little, but she still kept her head erect.

Joplin said, his voice lower than it had been before: „But Frank had as much chance as the rest of us.“

„No, no,“ she broke in. „He didn't have a chance. He told me all about it for the first time last year. He felt he was going to be the unlucky one. I had just inherited my grandfather's estate, and I got Frank a hundred thousand dollars in cash. Your rule was that the man who was chosen to die could contribute the cash to the fund, if he had it, in lieu of the policy.“ Her gaze burned across the table at Joplin. „Frank had the money!“ For the first time her eyes left Joplin, swung around the table at the others, resting a moment on each of them. „You were all too greedy. You took his money, and then you killed him to get the insurance besides!“

Those people were all so fascinated by the woman's manner that they never glanced toward the doorway where I was standing. I had wedged over so I could peer through the crack between the left-hand door and the jamb, and I kept damned quiet. I had learned more in the last four or five minutes than I had learned in the long drive up with Braden, and I was beginning to think even less of my client than I had before. If Mrs. Stanton was right, Braden was as much of a murderer as the others—even more culpable, in fact, because Stanton had been his partner.

The woman's breath was coming in short gasps now, her bosom was rising and falling quickly. She said huskily: „I loved Frank. You killed him. That's why I'm here.“ She pushed back her plate and rose, upsetting her chair. Her hand came up from under the table. She was holding the same automatic she had pointed at me, only now it was trained on Joplin.

„Joplin,“ she said, her voice rising slightly, „I'm going to kill you. I know I could never prove in court that you are a murderer. So I'm going to kill you.“

But Joplin wasn't slated to die right at that minute. The man sitting on her left suddenly swept up his arm, striking her wrist, and knocking the gun up in the air. It exploded, and the slug tore into the ceiling. The man who had struck her wrist seized her hand before she could fire again, twisted it behind her back. Her face white with pain, she uttered an involuntary gasp. The gun clattered to the floor.

The man grinned nastily, let her go. She sagged down into her chair, buried her head in her arms on the table. Her shoulders heaved spasmodically. She was sobbing silently.

Joplin said, coolly, for a man who had just faced death: „That was quick work, Gale. Thank you.“ He added dryly: „Why did you bother? It would have saved the trouble of drawing lots.“

Gale flushed. He was a man of about fifty, with a long, thin face that contrasted strangely with his full, red lips. „I acted without thinking,“ he said frankly. „I'm sure you'll overlook the thoughtlessness, Joplin.“

Braden had sat through it all as if he were paralyzed. Right then and there I decided that I wasn't going to be Mr. Braden's hired man any more. I was

beginning to entertain ideas of leaving there and getting Mrs. Stanton out with me, somehow. I couldn't bring myself to feel very badly about her desire to kill Joplin, not after what I had just learned.

But I didn't get far, because just then I felt something hard jabbed into my spine. A curt voice, which I recognized as Curie's, said:

„Let the gun drop easy, mister, if you don't want your backbone cracked in two!“

I let the gun drop to the floor. I could tell that Curie meant business. Also, I was sore at myself. I should have realized that Joplin must have heard the boards creaking when I crossed the lobby, and that when he whispered to Curie at the table, he was telling him to go around the back way and take a look.

I said: „Okay, Curie. You called the turn.“

Curie ordered: „Now walk inside, slow and easy.“

Joplin, Braden and the others watched us come in. Braden's face was a picture. I wish I could have caught it with a camera; any movie director in Hollywood would have signed him for a ten-year contract to register fear, consternation, terror and what not. Only Braden wasn't acting.

The others were more or less surprised. The woman still had her head on the table, and Joplin had turned around in his chair to stare at me woodenly. I had to hand it to him for cool nerve. He had sat, with his back to the doorway, knowing that somebody was out there who might take a pot shot at him. He said:

„I don't see how you got by Nick. You must be smarter than I thought.“

I didn't say anything, because there wasn't really anything to say. The next move was up to Joplin and his pals. And I wasn't feeling so good. Joplin said to Curie: „Pick up his gun from the floor, and leave us. I can handle him as long as he isn't armed.“ Curie nodded, picked up the gun, and went out through the hall. I was beginning to feel better. Joplin though that was my gun. He didn't know about my own .32 in the shoulder holster.

He got up from his chair, grabbed me by the coat collar. I thought he was going to lift me off the floor, but he didn't. He just said, coolly enough:

„You're a fool after all, Taylor. You would have been all right if you hadn't butted in. Now you've learned too much.“

I couldn't get at my gun on account of the way he was holding my coat. I felt like a small boy who was going to get a thrashing for stealing apples. Joplin kept his hold on me, turned to the men at the table.

„Gentlemen,“ he said, „I shall explain what this is about. Our good friend Braden was beginning to worry about drawing the deuce of spades. So he brought this man along to help him welch in case he was selected to commit suicide.“

Mrs. Stanton raised her head from the table while he was talking, and furtively dried her eyes with the back of her hand.

Joplin went on, talking to the men at the table, but keeping a corner of his eye on me and his big ham of a hand on my coat. „We all agreed at the outset of our—er—mutual undertaking, that any member who tried to trick the rest of us would automatically forfeit his life. What do you say, gentlemen, shall we take a vote on Braden instead of drawing lots?“

Braden started up in his seat, crying: „No, no... Taylor, Taylor! Help me!“

I didn't make any move to help him. I was busy getting set to help myself—and Mrs. Stanton. I was easing up my body so as to slip out of my coat. I figured it was the only way to do it, for there was no breaking Joplin's grip.

Gale, the one who had knocked up Mrs. Stanton's wrist, growled: „Let it be Braden.“

The others chimed in. It must have been a relief to all of them to find an easy goat like Braden for this picking.

Joplin boomed: „Well, that's decided.“ He swung his eyes on me. „You'll have to take it, too, Taylor. You know too much.“ Braden suddenly got active. Fear of death will put grease in anybody's knees. He leaped away from the table, ran, waddling, for the double doors. His face was twisted and chalky as he ran, and he started to yell something, but his breath was short, and he didn't get it out.

The man, Gale, dug his hand in his hip pocket, brought out an automatic, raised it deliberately and fired three slugs into Braden's back.

Braden was almost at the door when they caught him. He uttered a hoarse shriek, stumbled forward and hit the floor. He landed across the threshold on his face. His head and shoulders were in the lobby, the rest of him still in the dining room. He twitched convulsively, squirmed over on his back, clutched at the door jamb and then suddenly relaxed. He lay still.

Gale said dryly: „You boys will have to cover this up for me.“ He stared at me, fishy-eyed. „We can leave this gun in the detective's hand when we take care of him, and make it seem as if he murdered Braden. I—“

That was as far as he got, because I had been getting set for my own little stunt. I had been standing with my body tense, my coat in Joplin's grip. Now I raised my arms, twisted around and yanked myself out of my coat, leaving it in Joplin's hand. I had done that same thing once as a kid, when a cop caught me shooting immies⁽¹⁾ out of a bean shooter at him from around the corner. I never thought I'd have to repeat the trick as a grown man.

I got free, sidestepped just as Gale's automatic barked again and a slug missed me by a hair's-breadth. Joplin lurched after me, and I leaped across the floor in my shirtsleeves, reached the window and swung around to face that bloodthirsty crowd. I now had my own revolver out of the shoulder holster.

Gale was sighting for another try at me, and I snapped a single shot at him. I never miss when I shoot, which is a quality I've had to develop in order to survive in my business. My slug got Gale in the chest, flung him backward. He toppled against his chair, crashed to the floor. The other men in the room apparently weren't armed, for I didn't see any more guns in evidence. I saw Mrs. Stanton standing, gazing at me wide-eyed. I also saw Joplin. Joplin was coming at me now, barehanded, his face still an expressionless wooden mask. His huge body loomed in front of me, and his arms were outstretched as if he wanted to embrace me in a huge bear hug.

I swung my gun toward him, cried out shakily: „Hold it, Joplin!“

He paid no attention, but kept on coming. I hated to do it. It was massacre. But I didn't want to get inside those arms of his.

I squeezed once on the trigger. My gun bucked, roared, and the slug tore into Joplin's right shoulder, where I had wanted it to go. I expected it to stop him. But it didn't. He didn't even falter in his step. Only his eyes got a sort of dull, murky, dangerous gray.

Desperately I shifted aim, squeezed the trigger again.

This time I wasn't fooling; I sent the lead square into his chest. I could hear the sickening crunch of bones as a sort of echo to the explosion of my revolver, he was that close to me. A little froth of blood appeared at his mouth. His arms were almost around me, and his face was still wooden.

I heard myself shouting: „Stop, Joplin, I'll kill you!“ And then he was on me, blood gushing from his chest, his eyes blazing red in a wooden mask of a face. I jabbed my gun at him, let him have a bullet right through the forehead. It took that to stop him.

The momentum of his rush carried him into me, splattering me all over with blood. But he was dead. His heavy body slid down, struck the floor with a thud.

I stepped away from him, faced the rest of the room. There was no one there but Gale, who was dead; and Mrs. Stanton, standing white-faced by the table, and Braden's body, across the threshold. For a long minute we stared at each other across the room, and then there came from outside the sounds of starting motors. I swung for the window, but Mrs. Stanton's voice stopped me. „Let them go,“ she said wearily. „The rats have left the sinking ship.“ Her eyes rested somberly on the body of Joplin, and she swayed slightly. I patted her shoulder. „Stout girl,“ I said.

She murmured: „The murder syndicate—it's broken up!“

I nodded, glanced at the three bodies. „They never expected three deuces of spades in the one deck!“ I told her.



⁽¹⁾ Marbles.