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# A DAGGER *in the* DARK

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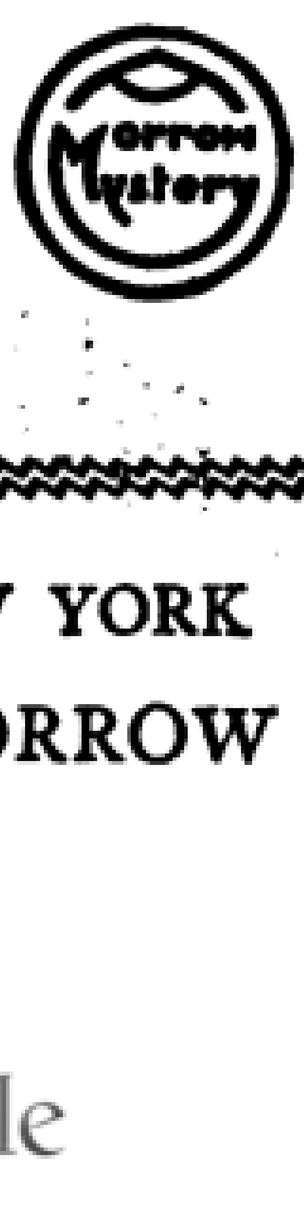
# A DAGGER *in the* DARK

*by*

**WALTER F. EBERHARDT**

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# A DAGGER *in the* DARK

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# Chapter I

THE outstanding impression made by Bernard Clague was that of a huge and competent cat—a six-foot feline, clean-faced and blue-eyed, who could cover the shortest distance between two points without seeming to move. Now, as he strode along easily and silently, he seemed like a shadow flitting eastward across Madison Avenue. Overhead, the clock on the Metropolitan Tower was flashing a quarter to midnight. Behind, in the park, all night sleepers were making bench reservations.

Schlemborn had telephoned to meet him at twelve. He had named a quiet hotel on the lower East Side where a room would be reserved under fictitious names. Schlemborn himself would be out at that hour but would return within forty minutes. The arrangement satisfied Clague. He knew his man too well to fear trickery. If he needed Schlemborn at times, the knowledge that he was even more essential to the fence left him free of uneasiness. There had been no reference over the phone to the purpose of the meeting, but Schlemborn had never called Clague to an appointment for the mere pleasure of seeing him. There was always a reason and Clague had a fairly sound idea of what the reason was this time.

A solitary clerk, elbow upon the desk, was study-



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ing a hangnail intently as Clague entered the hotel. It was five minutes to twelve.

"A reservation for Mr. Niles?"

The clerk stood up to see the room cards. He swung the register around, his face as impassive as if he had never seen Clague before.

"Mr. Ashton and Mr. Niles. Register, please."

In a bold, flowing hand, Clague wrote: "A. T. Niles, Athens, Ga."

"Mr. Ashton been in?"

"And out. He left about ten minutes ago," the clerk answered. He pounded the bell for the bellhop who stood two feet away. "Front 524."

Clague waited for the boy to get out of hearing. "Mr. Ashton had any visitors looking for him?"

The clerk shook his head.

"Wait a minute," he said, and disappeared behind the mail rack. Fifteen seconds later he was back. "There haven't been any telephone calls for him either."

Clague followed the bellhop to the single passenger elevator. A negro operator took them to the fifth floor. They turned right, went about fifty feet, the bellhop slightly in the lead. Turning down a corridor to the left, they passed Room 522 and stood in front of 524.

They were close to the door. Suddenly Clague shoved the bellhop aside, clasping a hand over the boy's mouth. Something was radically wrong inside. Clague's ear had caught the faint noise of slid-

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ing feet. His eye fastened on the dim light streaming under the door.

Someone was moving in the room Schlemborn had said would be empty!

With his right hand Clague seized the key from the fingers of the stupefied boy. His left gripped around his hip pocket. Anxiety betrayed him. As he tried to insert the key in the lock it scraped against the opening. The lights in the room went out. Footsteps raced across the floor, no longer attempting concealment.

Clague fumbled with the key, cursing his clumsiness. Finally he made it fit and turned it in the lock. The door gave. As he flung it open he felt the fresh air from an open window surge into his face. His fingers groped along the wall for the light switch and found it.

Everything appeared to be in order. Clague's mind raced as he noted each feature of the room. Two wicker chairs were standing where they might have been expected to stand. The bedspread was wrinkled. Schlemborn might have been sitting there or rested a heavy bundle on it. Only the open window at the fire escape looked wrong. Obviously someone had used it for a hasty exit. Yet, in all likelihood, that someone had been nothing more unique than a sneak thief.

And then Clague saw it, a thin red line threading across the rug from under the closed bathroom door. He flashed across the room and flung the door open.

"Cripes," he gasped. "Cripes."

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Schlemborn was dead, all right. His thick body, still hunched in an overcoat, was doubled up in a sitting position against the tub. His huge head hung down, the wide, unkempt beard almost concealing his paunch. Clague had to raise the head before he saw how Schlemborn had been killed. The front of his vest was thick with clotted blood. In his breast was a dagger, plunged in so forcefully that only the hilt stuck out. There was no sign of a fight.

Clague saw that the man was beyond help and rushed to the window. Below him the fire escape led down into impenetrable darkness. Rays of light from surrounding windows flickered feebly in the blackness. There was no hope of seeing anyone, and there was little hope that anyone had stayed to be seen. Clague withdrew his head.

Inside the room the bellhop had taken in everything and was whimpering.

"Shut up," Clague growled.

The panicky boy started to bolt for the door. Clague got a strangle hold on his collar.

"You stay," he ordered. "I'll need someone who sees everything I do here."

He sat at the telephone and called the room clerk.

"Get the nearest cop and come on up."

In the few moments of privacy he made a hasty survey. Bureau drawers were empty. So was the closet. Evidently Schlemborn had only intended to use the room for a business discussion. Turning to the murdered man, he felt lightly over the inanimate body for papers or packages, taking particular pains

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not to disturb its position or disarrange the clothing. He found nothing to interest him.

Only one thing seemed to be missing. Clague was still puzzling over it when a huge blue-coated figure thrust through the doorway, followed by the room clerk. Clague introduced himself quickly and presented his credentials.

"There's been a man murdered here, officer," he said, jerking his thumb towards the bathroom. "There was someone inside the room as I came up. I think he got away by the fire escape; the window was wide open."

The policeman strode to the bathroom. He bent over Schlemborn's prostrate body, still propped against the tub.

"He's dead," he announced.

"So I thought," Clague agreed. "You may want to have a squad surround the building. If my guess is right, though, our man's halfway to Albany by this time."

While the officer was telephoning the station, Clague drew the room clerk aside.

"How'd he get back up here?"

"H-h-how sh-should I know," the clerk answered with chattering teeth. "He passed me on the way to the door. I went behind the desk after that."

"Get the elevator boy," Clague ordered.

The point was cleared up quickly. Almost a minute after he had come downstairs, Schlemborn had returned to the lift and asked to be taken to his floor again. The clerk had been behind the desk. Satis-

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fied, Clague nodded and motioned the clerk to his side.

"Get me a list and description of everyone registered tonight," he said. "And let me know if anyone fails to check out tomorrow."

It wasn't his affair. Nevertheless, there were some things about it that puzzled him. One thing had been missing when he had examined Schlemborn's body. One thing that should have been there. He began looking through the closet and on racks. He was still looking when Dunlop and Greavy of the Homicide Squad blew in. Clague knew them both.

"Police surgeon and the flashlight man will be here soon," announced Dunlop, who entered first. Then he caught sight of Clague. "So you're on the job?"

The greeting was not unfriendly. Dunlop bore no animosity toward private detectives. At times they had even been helpful. If they ever got in the way, he got them out, quickly.

Tersely, Clague told his story to Dunlop while Greavy searched the room. Except for the fact that a promising business deal had gone to pieces it wasn't Clague's affair if one of Schlemborn's enemies had polished him off. He had no intention of getting into trouble by volunteering information. However, he had to explain his presence and the truth seemed harmless. He admitted that he had come to meet Schlemborn by appointment—why, he didn't know.

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"So you hadn't any idea why?" Dunlop sneered.

"No."

"And he could get you to come to any place he said at any goddam hour he wanted?"

"Well, he'd never disappointed me before." Clague's eyes were narrowing.

"And you don't know who put him on the spot?"

"No."

"Or why?"

"No."

"Hey, take a look at what I found under the corpse," Greavy shouted, coming from the bathroom. In his hand he held a silver cigarette case encrusted with diamonds and sapphires. On it were inlaid the initials "B. C."

Seeing his case in the detective's hand, Clague decided that a slightly fuller explanation might be worth while.

"You've heard of the Samurai pearls?"

"Worth a hundred grand."

"Press agent figures. About half."

"Fifty isn't to be sneezed at," Dunlop conceded.

"They're not particularly large and there's only sixty in the string," Clague continued, "but they're perfectly matched. You know the yellow pearls of the Orient?"

"No. You tell me," Dunlop said.

"Well, I don't either, except that these belonged to some sixteenth cousin of the Emperor and had been in his family since the days of the Samurai. That's how they got their name. The present head

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of the family got himself mixed up in some plot against the dynasty and had to take it on the lam. He sold the pearls to make his getaway. They've been traded from hand to hand for about two years now."

Dunlop was becoming impatient.

"What the hell's this got to do with the murder? I suppose you'll be telling me next that Schlemborn was the Emperor's stepson.

Clague's eyes looked past the detective's left shoulder.

"No," he said, "I'm trying to tell you why I'm here. Pantigras bought them last week and had them dressed up as a present for his wife."

Dunlop was impressed. "The Greek importer?" he asked.

"Yeah. He had them about two hours. They were taken from his coat pocket as he was leaving his office building on his way home. He wanted those pearls and he's so lousy with money he doesn't care what he does with it. He engaged me to get them. Ten thousand reward and no questions asked."

"You knew that was illegal, didn't you?" Greavy asked reprovingly.

"Nuts," Clague replied. "Pantigras didn't want to spoil the surprise and he wanted them back, so I got the wires working. Get it now?"

Dunlop's eyes trailed to the bathroom.

"Schlemborn—"

"Telephoned me tonight and I thought—"

Clague broke off as three new arrivals crowded

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past the bluecoat guarding the door. While the flashlight man got his camera together, the surgeon and fingerprint expert followed Dunlop to the bathroom. The surgeon's examination was very brief.

"Not a sign of a fight," he corroborated. "I can't understand why he let an enemy get close enough to strike such a terrific blow. The blade's stuck up to the hilt."

"Maybe he didn't see him. Maybe the room was dark," Dunlop suggested.

"I tell you the lights were on when I came up," Clague snapped. "Maybe it wasn't an enemy but a friend. Did you ever think of that?"

"I'm thinking of it," Dunlop replied, eyeing Clague.

"You're crazy," Clague yelled.

"You're not denying it's your cigarette case."

"No."

"I think that needs some explaining."

Just then the fingerprint expert got his nose under Dunlop's shoulder.

"All you guys have messed around that overcoat so much that if there ever were any prints on it they're merged now," he said. "But there might be something on that dagger handle—just an impression."

"Get it," Dunlop ordered curtly.

They were forming a small circle now, Clague, the two detectives and the clerk. Clague, once started, refused to be squelched.

"I don't give a good goddam what you think," he

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bellowed. "I had the case twenty-four hours ago and never missed it till you stuck it under my nose. I don't know how it got here and that's straight. And if you're trying to hang anything on me check up with these men here. There's been someone at my side ever since I came in the hotel to register downstairs."

"Yeah, and supposing you were in the hotel before you registered?" Greavy asked.

Clague whirled on him.

"Check up on that too. And if you're so all-fired smart, here's something to check up on instead of wasting your time wisecracking. Find out what happened to Schlemborn's hat."

"His hat?" Greavy echoed.

"He ain't got one," Dunlop said.

Clague knew he was on the right track now. His counterattack had diverted attention from himself. The cigarette case was worrying him; it would take a lot of explaining.

"And I suppose a man with Schlemborn's gray, straggling hairs was walking the streets bareheaded," he bellowed at Dunlop. "Ask this boy here."

"What kind of a hat did he wear, kid?" Dunlop asked the bellhop.

"A soft hat, without a crown, pulled down over his ears," the boy replied.

"I'm sure it was a derby," the room clerk chattered.

Dunlop had the elevator boy called in. He

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couldn't tell what kind of a hat Schlemborn had worn; but all three agreed he had had one.

"It ain't here now," announced Greavy, who had been rummaging in the closet and under the bed.

"Smart guy," Clague murmured.

"Maybe it fell out the window," Dunlop suggested.

"Maybe it didn't fall," Clague cut in. "And maybe—" His eyes turned to the room clerk; but when he spoke again it was Dunlop he addressed. "No point my hanging around here. I'm going to blow."

"Not thinking of leaving town, are you?" Greavy asked.

Clague's eyes snapped shut. "Don't be an ass; unless you boys want to swear out a warrant or hold me on suspicion, I'm walking out right now. Any objections, Dunlop?"

Dunlop shook his head.

"No, but what's the rush?"

"There ain't none, except that having left the city payroll I've got to work for a living. It's not my affair and I can't spend all night figuring who knifed a guy who knifed everyone he could."

Greavy nudged Dunlop.

"Sympathetic as hell, ain't he?"

"You'd think it was his own brother," Dunlop agreed.

Clague started for the door.

"I may want to see you in the morning," Dunlop said.

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"You know where to find me. You've been there before."

"Better take Greavy with you," Dunlop added. "The squad's around the place and there's a detail going through the rooms. If they see you going out alone, they may nab you. They'll think you're the guy we're looking for."

"Not a chance," was Clague's parting shot. "Anyway, all you're going to get of that guy is his hat and maybe an overcoat with the labels torn out."

He found a taxi a half block from the hotel. He lived on West Twelfth Street in an old-fashioned brownstone building whose two-and-a-half stories nestled between the rows of apartment houses on either side. In the cab he decided that he was glad to be out of it. It was no concern of his. All it meant was that he'd have to start earning the ten grand for the return of the pearls all over again. Maybe Schlemborn had had them on him when he was knifed. Somehow, though, it didn't seem very likely.

The street where Clague lived was in darkness except for the tiny light in his own vestibule. He paid the driver, got his change and saw the man drive off into the night. Turning toward his doorway, a coin slipped from his hand. He stooped over to pick it up. As he bent down there was a whirring noise over his head. Metal clattered on the steps. Like a cat Clague bounded into the protection of the vestibule walls. Sheltered, he peered out with a gun in his right hand.

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For several minutes he waited in silence. He thought he detected the sound of footsteps racing down the street but it was impossible to distinguish any human form in the darkness. When he felt certain the danger was over, he emerged from his hiding place. On the steps he found a dagger, an ornate Byzantine weapon. As far as he could remember the handle was identical with the one that he had seen protruding from Schlemborn's bloody breast.

Two things were clear in Clague's mind. First of all he understood how Schlemborn had been killed without a struggle. Second, he realized that he himself was, in some way, vitally involved.

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# Chapter II

SHADOWS broke the long sweep of the living room. From opposite corners the light from two shaded lamps tried unsuccessfully to bridge the intervening floor space. Against the west wall fitful flames of a log fire cast a shifting arc of light as far as the nearby couch. Otherwise there was darkness—a darkness in which a piano, bookcases, tables and chairs stood out only as shadows deeper than the rest.

Jasper, the seventy-five percent erect menial, who combined the duties of valet, butler and chef in the household, was putting away Clague's hat and coat. Clague himself was seated before the fire, moodily trying to solve the night's riddle.

What, he asked himself, were the known facts?

Pantigras, a wealthy importer, had had a valuable string of pearls stolen. He had engaged Clague. Only one thing had been stipulated: the jewels had to be found. Questions didn't count. Neither did money. Pantigras' starting bid was twenty grand, half for Clague and half to be distributed as Clague should find necessary.

Schlemborn, through whom Clague was working, had been killed. The murder had come at the very moment when he seemed to have traced the jewels. Ordinarily, the killing could have been



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ascribed to any one of a dozen feuds. But an attempt had been made to kill Clague in an almost identical manner. The only connecting link between the two men was the pearls. Clague had to know how the link had been established. He knew that he hadn't given anything away. No one had followed him to the hotel.

Obviously, someone had betrayed him. The field narrowed. So did Clague's eyes as he accepted the inevitable conclusion. He sent Jasper into the kitchen to bring him scrambled eggs and milk and seated himself at the phone. In the kitchen, there was no telephone extension. Clague called Schlemborn's home.

Mrs. Schlemborn answered. Her first words proclaimed her ignorance of her husband's death.

"Cressup's my name," he lied in reply to her question. He was uncertain how much Schlemborn discussed business affairs at home. "I'm sorry to bother you at this hour but I had an important engagement with your husband at my home and he hasn't shown up."

"I don't know nodding about it."

"Did he mention it at all?"

"All I know he calls up some man about seven. He makes an appointment to meet him at a hotel around twelve. That's *all* I know."

"It occurred to me later that he might not have had my home address. I tried to telephone him several times during the evening to make sure but I couldn't get any answer to the number."

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"I don'd know. We ain't had no calls since he talked with that man."

"Did he have any visitors?"

"Visitors. No, why?"

Clague hung up quietly. He was satisfied that Schlemborn's opportunities to talk had been limited. To make certain he called the hotel and asked for Morton Stern, the room clerk.

What he got was Dunlop in Room 524.

"Thought you were safe and in bed," Dunlop growled.

"Neither, thanks. Listen, Dunlop, I've got to talk to Stern."

"Gor to . . . well, for crying out loud!"

"Don't be a heel. It's important . . . may help you. And every second counts."

Clague caught the muffled conversation at the other end, then the room clerk's shaky soprano whined over the wire.

"Listen, Stern. I want to find out just when Schlemborn registered and how you're certain of it."

Stern was certain. It had been within five minutes after ten. He was sure because at some time or other while Schlemborn was signing the register, Stern had looked at the wall clock.

Clague nodded to himself as he listened to the reply.

"One thing more, Stern," he said. "After Schlemborn registered did anyone come in and ask for a room either next to or directly above or below his?"

"No, sir," Stern answered, "that is, not for Mr.

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Schlemborn's room. But a man came in and registered right after he'd gone upstairs. What this man wanted was a room on a fire escape. He'd been in one hotel fire and was deathly afraid of another."

"What room did he get?"

"Room 624."

"Right above Schlemborn?"

"Yes, sir."

"Who suggested it?"

"We both did. I pointed out several on the fire escapes and he picked that one."

"As I remember you use the old type hotel register, not individual cards, but full page leafs."

"Yes, sir."

"So that this man had Schlemborn's room number as Mr. Ashton, knowing he was the last to register, right in front of him?"

"That's right, Mr. Clague." Stern was becoming excited. "He was a little chap with olive features and a scar on his lip, but I'm not sure if it was the right or left side. And his name was Brown."

"Or Black. Who cares? Put Dunlop on."

Clague heard the detective's growl and swung into talk.

"You've listened to what your killer looks like and his room number. You ought to find his hat there. That's why he took Schlemborn's, to make his getaway without attracting too much attention. Now go get him."

Dunlop snorted in derision. "Thought you hadn't no interest in him?" he said.

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"I hadn't, until he took an interest in me. And besides, I hate knife throwers."

"Knife throwers! So that's it. How'd you guess?"

"I've had a personal demonstration. I've been—Tell you in the morning," he broke off abruptly and hung up.

Jasper had reëntered the room, tray in hand, and was making for the alcove in front of the fireplace. Watching him shuffle across the room, shoulders limp, eyes wandering and blank, Clague shook his head in bewilderment. The man was a coward and a weakling, but in the two years he had been there Clague had been unable to detect in him the slightest violation of trust. Now, apparently, he had spied on and betrayed his master.

Clague trod noiselessly until he stood next to the bent figure.

"Better come through, Jasper," he said.

The man's lower lip quivered.

"I'll make it hot for you if you don't. How long have you been listening in on the extension upstairs?"

"Tonight was the first time. I swear it."

"You heard me make a hotel appointment tonight?"

"Yes, sir."

"And knew it was with Schlemborn?"

"I didn't."

"But the man you called did?"

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"He called me. After you'd left. He seemed to know when you were out."

"And you gave him my cigarette case?"

"No, sir. I've never seen him. A messenger boy called for that. He said he had to have something of yours. I hope I haven't caused any trouble, sir."

Clague smiled grimly.

"What'd he have on you?" he asked.

"Five years out in Illinois . . . for pen scratching. I escaped right after the sentence."

"You don't want to go back there, do you?"

"For God's sake, no."

"Who was this man?"

Jasper's face assumed a terrified look.

"I don't know, sir. I've never seen him. He never gave me a name, just called himself Mr. A. And he always called me."

Clague's manner was deceptively calm.

"I've come near being bumped off tonight, Jasper," he said. "I've seen a valuable fence do his last bit for me and I've had ten grand almost snatched from my hands. Who is he?"

"I don't know, sir."

Clague's eyes remained cold, but his clenched fist struck out, catching Jasper on the mouth. A thin stream of blood trickled down the man's lip.

"God damn you, talk," Clague shouted.

"I don't know, sir."

Clague's fist landed again. It sent Jasper stumbling into a corner of the lounge. He lay there

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sobbing, his head buried in the cushions and his arms raised to ward off another blow.

"I don't know, sir."

He was terror stricken beyond doubt. Even Clague saw that if he had anything to tell, he'd tell it.

"What's behind it then? When—"

The question he was about to ask was interrupted by the muffled sound of the door bell. Clague tossed an unused handkerchief from his lapel pocket to Jasper.

"Answer the door," he said.

The man wiped his lips with shaking hands and stumbled groggily toward the front entrance. Clague took his stand in the semi-gloom, his right hand resting on his hip pocket.

From outside a girl's shrill voice broke the unearthly silence.

"I've got to see Mr. Clague, I tell you. I don't care how late it is, I've got to see him."

A second later she came rushing into the living room. She was small and her squirrel coat was expensive. The collar framed a heart-shaped face, startlingly white under auburn hair. She hurled herself upon Clague, throwing both arms about him.

"You've got to save me, Mr. Clague," she pleaded. "You've simply got to."

Clague disengaged himself by the simple expedient of placing a hand on each of her shoulders and shoving her back. When she was out of reach he was ready to drop his arms again.

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"Keep 'em up, Clague," a harsh voice ordered.

It came from the entrance. Two men, their faces concealed by the gloom, had him covered. As they advanced, Jasper, guided by a third intruder's gun, backed into the room. Clague hadn't heard the front door close.

"My respects," he said to the girl. "You've mistaken your profession."

She curtsied in return, a cynical smile on her lips.

"I usually receive guests with more hospitality," he said to the gang leader, indicating his raised hands, "but then they usually let me know in advance when they're going to call. I don't seem to recognize you fellows at all. Chicago getting too hot?"

They were in the center of the room now and it was possible to get a look at them. Two of them were common gunmen, strong and stupid. But the one who had warned Clague to keep his arms up was a different type. He had wavy blond hair and an immature, hairless face. His cheeks were flushed, his lips tightly clenched. It was he who replied.

"Cut the low comedy, Clague," he drawled. "You know what we're after."

"Sorry, I don't."

"What you went after tonight."

"And didn't get."

"How do we know that?"

"Search me."

The boy bandit motioned to one of his aids. "Frisk him." The man approached Clague from

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behind and began pawing over his clothes, from coat collar down to trouser cuffs. The leader kept on talking.

"Schlemborn was to have handed them over to you tonight?"

"I was hoping he would."

"He didn't have them? Who else would but you?"

"That's what I'd like to know. I'd also like to know how long you're going to keep me standing like this. My hands are getting tired."

If Clague had expected sympathy from the immature face he was disappointed. "Keep them up," was the relentless answer. The man who had finished searching Clague said: "They're not on him."

"Search the room," the leader said. He kept Clague covered while his aides ransacked every corner. The girl remained lounging against the piano, her smile perpetual. The men treated her with deference but Clague noted that they never seemed to regard her as one of the gang.

After five minutes, Clague began to lose patience.

"Look here, can't you take my word?" he argued. "I've only been back fifteen minutes and I haven't been out of this room."

"So you say. But some one got to Schlemborn first." A thought suddenly occurred to him and his lips tightened. "Unless that pimp—"

"What pimp?" Clague asked.

"Shut up," he was told.

There was a crash as an avalanche of books fell

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from the cases to the floor. The gunmen tossed pages open in a frantic and futile search for a hiding place.

"Seems to me you're going to a lot of trouble for those baubles," Clague kidded. "Let me know when you get them and I'll buy them from you."

The baby's nostrils twitched.

"What's the offer?"

"Ten grand."

The nostrils stopped twitching. Two round blue eyes, devoid of expression, focused on Clague.

"Christ, you're cheap. Know what they're worth?"

"You tell me," Clague said, still kidding.

"That's piker's dough for what you can get for them—from the right party."

It wasn't clear, but Clague was willing to play along.

"All right," he said, "you set the figure and we'll turn things around. I'll work for you."

The men were getting discouraged. The room was in chaos; they were hot and dirty; they couldn't find the pearls.

"We're going to get them, Clague, if we have to go through the whole house," the blond boy announced. "And we can't leave you behind to crab the act."

He seemed a boy reciting a declamation as he stepped close to Clague. The threatening thing about him was the colorless, metallic ring of his voice.

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"Where are they, Clague?"

"I've told you I don't know."

"Will this help you find out?"

A thin, pink palm, manicured but muscular, spanked Clague's face with all the force an open hand can muster. The girl at the piano let out a little scream. Clague's face turned deathly white.

"I don't like that," he said. "I've never taken that from anyone before."

"You'll take it from me and like it," the boy said. It seemed inconceivable that his face could be so childish. "Where are they?"

"I don't know."

A clenched fish crashed against Clague's lips and made him blink.

"Damn you, talk. Do you know now?"

"I'll know you when I see you again," Clague replied, lowering one hand to wipe his mouth. He was covered and he didn't have any more illusions about Baby Face.

"Where are they?"

"I don't know."

Clague saw the blow coming and started to lower his hands to protect himself. It was too late. The butt of an automatic slammed against his forehead. The lights became blurred. Clague felt himself falling, groped for support, found none and sank to the floor.

The minutes that passed might have been hours as far as Clague was concerned. He revived to feel water trickling down his face and to smell gardenia

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perfume in his nostrils. Through eyes clouded with pain he saw the girl of the squirrel coat bending over him.

"Can the feet work?"

Clague nodded, his head still swimming. With the girl's aid he struggled to the lounge. There she examined his wound.

"Nothing cracked, outside. Just a potato rainbow needing a cold poultice. Wait."

Two minutes later she was back from the kitchen with ice and a towel. As she bandaged Clague's head her talk rambled.

"Place's a mess . . . nothing missing . . . but everything overturned . . . gang's gone . . . took Jasper . . . he won't be hurt . . . boy, I bet that hit a nerve . . . don't blame you for jumping . . . I came back after they'd gone."

"Why?" Clague asked.

"Nito's a butcher."

"Nito?"

"Baby Face. He thinks every job should have an undertaker."

"I'll remember him." Clague's head was clearing.

"Forget him and get some sleep. Need any help upstairs?"

Clague rose. The girl had stepped forward to lend a helping hand. Glancing up, she caught the look in Clague's eye. She raced for the piano, got her handbag, pulled out a revolver and leveled it at Clague.

"Try that and you'll get more than Baby Face

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wanted to give you," she warned. There had come to Clague the wild idea of smashing the gang by grabbing this girl and making her talk. He already regretted the impulse.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Weakened as he was, he stumbled toward the stairway. The girl moved forward to help but he waved her aside.

"Just stand by to see it's oke," he said. "What's it all about, anyway?"

"I don't know," she snapped. "I had my job and did it. That's all I know. And I didn't come back to answer questions."

"But you did come back. Why?"

"Don't know. Sort of admired the way you took what Baby Face had to give."

Clague wheeled, walked slowly toward the lowered revolver barrel and brushed it aside.

"Don't worry this time," he said. "No more brainstorms."

She made no answer. Clague's hands on her shoulders moved caressingly. "And you just admired the way I took it," he said dreamily.

Her hands stroked Clague's coat lapels. Inch by inch the finger tips rose to the back of his collar, the revolver still dangling limply. Her face was raised; her eyes, half-shut, looked into Clague's as they came nearer and nearer. Suddenly she thrust him backward. Her arms whipped down.

"I'm riding the crest," she flung at him, "and I'm in the driver's seat. It's coming my way . . .

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more than I'll ever see again . . . I'm not passing it up for any man."

Clague shrugged his shoulders.

"I wish you luck."

He watched her replace the revolver in the handbag and draw her coat around her.

"You're not in that gang," he said. "Tell me, what's your racket?"

Her smile mocked him as she leaned forward.

"My name's Myrna O'Lally. I'm just out of Teachers' Training School, and live with my grandmother on Park Avenue. If you're interested in the Junior League I'll send you a ticket to the next bazaar."

She swept him a courtesy. Clague barely had time to mumble a heartfelt "Good luck, kid," before she passed out of the room. He heard the front door close, then tottered upstairs, almost unconscious from exhaustion.

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# CHAPTER III

WHEN Clague awoke the next morning, the sunlight was streaming through his bedroom window. His bandaged head throbbed a warning to stay in bed, but he couldn't obey. There were too many things needing attention.

He wanted his house cleaned up. He wanted to talk with the jewelers who had sold Pantigras the yellow pearls. He wanted to go over the files of Chicago gunmen at headquarters and he wanted to check up with a vaudeville agency on the knife throwers loose in town.

He did none of these things.

After a quick breakfast he taxied to his office in the Broberts Building just off Times Square. On the sixteenth floor he let himself in to his private office by a side entrance.

Then he glanced through the door into the reception room and was sorry. The only person waiting was Felicia Florente and she saw Clague. Before he could stop her she was halfway through the doorway.

"Thought I told you to keep out of here," Clague growled.

Felicia's answer was a gloved hand, coyly raised. The ends of five yellowbacks, all hundreds, extended above the fingertips.



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"Come in," Clague said.

He jerked his head in the direction of a chair and seated himself behind the desk. He lit a cigarette, deliberately refraining from offering her one. Then he turned to her with none too friendly eyes.

"What's the story?"

"It is Rodriguez." Felicia colored her phrases with a lisping Latin accent.

"I'm supposed to know him?"

"He sings and dances at the Golden Pheasant . . . where I am hostess . . . he has form . . . personale-ety . . . the voice vibrant . . . feet that fly . . . people just stare at heem."

Clague yawned. "Rudy Vallée, Cortez, Chevalier in one."

"But he have no confidence; he is modest. I need your help."

Clague gulped. "My God, you're asking me to be moral inspiration to a dancing gigolo?"

"You do not und'stand," Felicia said, pushing the money over. "Rodriguez, he disappear."

"Eh!"

"Because he dreads his public . . . the public that loves heem."

Felicia was trying to make this a matter of life and death. Her eyes gleamed; her hands fluttered up and down following the crescendos of her voice. Impossible to argue against such reasoning, Clague thought.

"Let's see," he tried gently, "you make a hundred a week, Felicia?"

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"A hundred and twenty-five. I am hostess."

"All right, a hundred and a quarter. But that's all."

"I 'ave other means of income."

"Rodriguez know that?"

The black eyes spat at him. "You mind your own damn' business."

"I'm willing to."

"But you will help, Bernard."

Clague exploded. "Don't you ever call me that again. God knows I don't want you around here but if you remind me we've met before I'll kick you out."

Clague's temper subsided as quickly as it had arisen. "Let's get this straight; out of professional admiration for a rising artist you're willing to pay me four weeks of your salary—just as a retainer, mind you—to bring him back to his art."

His own words filled him with unbelief. Despite experiences which should have hardened her against emotional weaknesses, this woman was throwing aside all reserve in chasing after an apparently disinterested lover.

"Christ, you always were an easy mark for a stallion."

Felicia took it as a promise of hope. "Then you will help?" she asked.

There was no use trying to checkrein a stubborn horse. There was even less use throwing money away. Clague pocketed the five hundred.

"I'll help," he said. "Who is this Rodriguez and when did you see him last?"

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"Rodriguez Martinez an' I see him after the last show Sunday night."

"And this is Tuesday. You're telling me two days after he's vamoosed."

"But how could I know—"

"You couldn't know. Anything. And don't. Where does he live?"

Felicia mentioned an address on East Eighty-fourth Street. While Clague jotted it down she added pointlessly, "He have not much money so he live in a furnished room, poor boy."

Clague snorted. "Any idea where he might be hiding? No? I shouldn't have expected it. If he's still in town I'll find him."

"You will?"

Impulsively Felicia ran around the desk. Before Clague could stop her she had thrown both arms around his neck. The door from the reception room opened and Dunlop and Greavy trotted in.

Dunlop nudged his partner.

"Just can't keep 'em away, can you, Clague?"

Clague was furious. "Beat it," he told Felicia. "When there's news you'll hear from me." He turned to Dunlop and Greavy: "You fellows ever announce yourselves or don't you visit speakeasies?"

Greavy said: "Don't blame the kid outside. He tried hard."

Dunlop saw Clague's discolored forehead. "Chees, who kissed you?" he asked.

Clague replied by reciting the happenings of the previous night.

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"You fellows still think I killed Schlemborn?" he concluded.

"Hell, Barney, we never did," Greavy said.

"We got more important things," Dunlop commented.

"Yeah?" Clague yawned.

Dunlop sidled up, his voice placating: "Was Schlemborn being blackmailed that you know of?"

"That I know of?" Clague barked. "I don't know a thing about him except what deals we had. A dozen people might have blackmailed him; but I don't think so. He had no secrets. Everyone knew he was a fence. You can't blackmail a guy for what everyone knows, even the police."

Dunlop ignored the thrust. "I oughtn't to tell you but—"

"Don't," Clague agreed.

"Dammit, Clague, do you have to be snooty? I'm trying to tell you there's an organized blackmail ring operating and they bumped off Ormsby this morning."

"The stock broker?" Clague was impressed.

"Yes."

"He knew they were after him?"

"Yes."

"And he didn't have a bodyguard?"

"They got him in spite of one."

Clague sat on the corner of his desk. "How'd it happen?"

"Well, you know his apartment on Fourth Avenue. He was alone dressing in the bedroom. The

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window looks out on a small areaway. It was open."

"Who had the apartment opposite it?"

"Empty. Ormsby's bedroom door was locked. He'd been dead a half hour when they broke it in."

"No one heard the shot?"

"There was no shot."

Dunlop reached in his coat pocket and extracted a strong, slender dagger with a unique Byzantine handle.

Clague grunted.

"I've seen those before. That guy's had a busy twenty-four hours."

"You get the point now, Clague. Had any wealthy citizens coming to you for protection?"

"No."

"They'd be more apt to come to you than to the police because everyone this gang goes after they've got something on. We've had four,—all big men. The only reason they squealed to us was because they felt more like saving their hides than their reputations. They're sure this gang means business. And if four come to us there must be dozens too scared to squeal even to save their hides."

"No," Clague repeated.

"Well, if you hear of any—"

"Who are the four who came to you?"

Dunlop remained silent. Clague was irritated.

"Just an old flatfoot trick," he stormed, "trying to chisel information and hold out at the same time."

"We don't have to give information to get it," Greavy said.

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"Big business guy," Clague sneered. "Won't consider a merger."

Dunlop ranged himself alongside Clague, topping him by two inches.

"Listen, mug," he said, emphasizing every word. "When we want information we get it. When we don't want to give any we don't. And usually people find it's best to play along with us."

"Smart, eh?"

"And sure."

"Just a couple of bright boys, you two."

"Ready to tell us anything?"

"I've got nothing to tell."

"Oke." Dunlop swung on his heel and motioned Greavy to the side entrance. "Don't try to leave town, Clague."

Clague's fists itched for a fight but he held himself back as he watched them go. He couldn't afford to get in a row with the police. Once they were out he forced himself to sit down and think quietly. The blackmail ring, supposing there was one, was none of his affair, excepting the coincidence of the knife that killed Ormsby. He couldn't see a connection, but there must be one. The gang that had knifed Ormsby had been after him also. Why? Because of pearls for which he was to get ten grand. Piker money, Baby Face had said. There must be a more serious motive. Clague strove to find an answer to the riddle. He wasn't going to waste time tracing the knives. The police were undoubtedly doing that. The jewelers were his best bet.

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Before Clague could get under way, the door opened. Dingy stuck his sorrel top in. He was an astute character, nineteen years old, whom Clague had salvaged from a reform school and treated to a secretarial course. Clague knew that he wouldn't dare go wrong and he could be hired for less than a regular secretary.

"Class," Dingy proclaimed, "is outside."

"What's its name?"

"He won't give any."

Clague shifted so that his gaze could take in the narrow slit where the door swung on a hinge. And then he agreed with Dingy. Class was outside.

The visitor was an aristocrat, with the cold, proud face seen only and often in the portraits of Florentine nobles. An Italian, Clague guessed, but such a one as you seldom find. Immaculately dressed, erect in carriage, slender and tall, the thin ascetic face slightly contradicted by a rigid jaw. Streaks of iron gray in hair rapidly turning white.

Clague dipped into a drawer and pulled out a folio of impressive-looking legal documents. He scattered them promiscuously over the desk top.

"Show him in," he ordered.

A moment later Clague heard his name spoken in a low, well-modulated voice. He half rose in acknowledgment.

"You will understand later when I go into reasons—if I do, Mr. Clague—why I was averse to giving my name outside. First let me ask you how you regard relations with your clients. Are they as con-

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fidential as, let us say, the relations between a lawyer and his client?"

"Absolutely," Clague replied, marveling at the other's perfect English.

"Then, please, consider me your client. Our relations are confidential. My name is Antonio Fortuno Morello. You may have heard of me."

Clague recognized the man instantly as the head of the city's largest private bank, an institution that had grown entirely upon the ability and integrity of the man whose name it bore.

"I want you to find someone for me."

"Our business," Clague assured him.

A momentary gleam of approval from the black eyes opposite was the answer to his terse retort.

"I must tell you a story," Morello continued. "In confidence. Some years ago my brother, who held a position of high trust with a bank in Milan, absconded with a large sum of money. The money has since been repaid and my brother is now dead. I had thought it was all forgotten, but that, unfortunately, is not the case. Someone has gotten hold of the story and is trying to make me pay.

"You can understand my position. Despite the fact that my brother is no more and that restitution has been made, such a story, if it were to spread, would have an effect upon the institution I head. This is especially true at the present time when negotiations are under way for the sale of the bank. I cannot afford to have the story get out."

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"Has there been any direct attempt at intimidation?" Clague asked.

"No. But along with the intimation that he knew this story, this man has hinted at one or two more forceful means of persuasion that he could use. His demands have not been heavy and I have granted them willingly, feeling that I was fully protected as long as I knew where he was."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Three, maybe four months. But I am suddenly anxious because within the last few days this man has disappeared. I have not had any demands from him since then—but I am afraid his going away is not a happy omen for me."

Clague nodded, understanding.

"What you want me to do is find this man and see that there aren't any demands," he said; but Morello shook his head vigorously.

"Just find him," he said; "I can handle him myself."

Clague took out a pencil to write. "Who is he?"

"His name is Rodriguez Martinez."

"Eh?" The pencil scrawled aimlessly.

"Up to two nights ago he was an entertainer at a night club, the Golden Pheasant. That is where I keep my eye on him. He lives here."

Morello produced a scrap of paper bearing the address Clague already knew. Clague, with his mind on what Dunlop had said about a blackmail ring, asked:

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"Do you think this man has repeated what he knows to anyone else?"

"No," Morello answered decisively. "I have watched him closely. He has no friends. He plays alone."

"Can you tell me anything about his habits?"

"Very little, I am afraid. He made no close friends at the club. He regarded the other performers as so much scum."

Clague nodded, wishing Felicia were present.

"Not much to go on, but if he's still in the city, I'll find him. I'll start one of my operatives on it at once."

Morello leaned forward earnestly.

"Mr. Clague, excuse me if I seem to press. With the sale of the bank imminent, the matter is of great importance. How much would you consider to give the case your personal attention, exclusive of anything else?"

Clague thought quickly. This client seemed to be ripe for the plucking. Or there was a catch in it.

"Three thousand a week, for my exclusive time," he said.

If this was bait, Morello refused to nibble. He spread out his hands deprecatingly.

"Mr. Clague, being a banker does not mean I am a millionaire."

Clague accepted it as a challenge.

"That's what it means to me, Mr. Morello. If I give all my time to this one thing it means dropping other business. And some of the work involved in

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your case could be done just as well by my operatives. This agency has the reputation of having the most dependable operatives you'll find anywhere in the city."

Morello bowed his agreement.

"Then, Mr. Clague, I leave it to your hands. Good day, on that basis, until you let me hear from you. You know where to find me? Yes? Good day."

Courteous old geezer, Clague thought, as he watched the proud figure leave his office. The minute Morello had closed the front door behind him, Clague buzzed for Dingy.

"Pantigras called today?"

Pantigras hadn't. Clague, who knew the Greek as an impatient client, was pleasantly surprised. He hated making alibis.

"Send Hogan in."

To his operative Clague gave the address on Eighty-fourth Street together with instructions.

"Make the landlady or whoever runs the place show you the room occupied up to Sunday night by Rodriguez Martinez. Grab anything there that might give you a line on his habits, associates or where he might have scooted to. Beat it."

Clague, picking up his hat and coat, turned to Dingy.

"We've got a Greek apt to call up any moment asking for his jewels," he said. "We've added a wop and a spiggot today. If some frog and a heine show up we'll call this the International Agency."

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# CHAPTER IV

CLAGUE returned to his office shortly before six, sullen with disappointment.

He had drawn a blank from the vaudeville agencies. There were too many unemployed stiletto hurlers around the city to keep track of them all. None of the known ones answered the description which the hotel clerk had given of the man Brown. The jewelers from whom Pantigras had bought the pearls declined to discuss customers' business with outsiders. Clague's storming and threatening were of no avail. Birnheimer, a second-rate fence whom Clague had asked to take up the underworld trail of the pearls where Schlemborn had left off, refused point-blank. Schlemborn had tried and Schlemborn was dead, he pointed out. Not all the argument in the world could convince him that the murder was coincidence.

In only one respect did Clague meet with even partial success. At headquarters a photographer established Baby Face as Benito (Kewpie) Calloni, Chicago gangster and muscle man. Even there, however, Clague was stopped. There was no charge outstanding against Baby Face. Headquarters didn't even know he was in town. The best they could promise was to let Clague know when he was located.



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Hogan was the first to appear after Clague had settled in his office.

"That guy didn't intend to be traced," he reported. "The place is as bare as Mother Hubbard's cupboard. No clothes, no papers. Not even a X to mark where he laid."

"Ashes."

"Nothin'."

"Oke." Clague dismissed him.

Pantigras telephoned. The sleek Greek was becoming worried. He wanted to know when he could present the pearls to his wife. Clague reported progress.

"And tell your jewelers," he concluded, "that when someone working in your interest calls on them and asks for information, they're to give it."

Pantigras' voice suddenly rasped with annoyance.

"You called on my jewelers?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"When?"

"This morning—maybe this afternoon."

Clague could almost hear Pantigras thinking. Then:

"Mr. Clague, I asked you to find out where the pearls went to, not where they came from."

Clague blew up, partly for effect and partly as an outlet for the day's accumulated disappointments.

"I'm sorry you feel that way about it, Mr. Pantigras," he said with cutting irony, "but get this. You retained me to find those pearls. Until you

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fire me that's what I'm working for. If you don't like the way I do it, go after them yourself. But until you do, I'm running things my own way and I'll be expecting your coöperation."

"Was it necessary to annoy my jewelers?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Supposing you let me run my own business."

"I am doing that," Pantigras remonstrated.

"The hell you say."

"But I think you are needlessly officious."

"You'll think differently, maybe, if you wake up some morning with a knife sticking in your throat."

There was a dead silence, as if a high voltage wire had suddenly snapped. When Pantigras spoke again his voice was much calmer.

"What makes you say that, Mr. Clague?"

"Just a way I have."

"You are joking, surely."

"If it sounds funny to you?"

"Then what did you mean?"

"Let me run things. Help when I yelp. And tell your damned jewelers to speak up when they're asked."

Clague hung up. He couldn't understand it. The mention of the knife had thrown Pantigras out of gear. Why? Because of Schlemborn's murder? The newspaper accounts hadn't mentioned Clague's name in connection with it. And Clague hadn't told Pantigras that the fence was working on the case.

The answer must lie elsewhere. At the moment

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however, Clague had other matters to worry about. Rodriguez, for example. Now that the gigolo had made a clean getaway Clague needed a photograph. You couldn't chase all over the country—or even the city for that matter—trying to find a man without knowing what he looked like. Clague was certain that Felicia could supply a picture. At five minutes past eleven he strolled up to the Golden Pheasant. He gave the outside of the place a thorough once over. If the cabaret had formerly advertised pictures of Rodriguez, they had been removed since his unannounced disappearance. The framed lobby panels outside the entrance showed shots of Felicia in various abbreviations of costume all conclusively proving that the girl had sex appeal. Too obviously, Clague thought, the memory distasteful. There were photographs of Dmitri Anreyneyeff, formerly of the Russian Imperial Ballet, entertainers of minor importance and a chorus of about twenty girls. Felicia and Anreyneyeff claimed the name credits on the hand-painted announcement panels posted on the sidewalk. Underneath their names was painted a thick white line. It might have been put in very recently to blot out some other name.

Clague entered and walked down a flight of velvet carpeted stairs. From the tiny cloak-room foyer to the main dining room was an unobstructed view. The room was still empty but waiters were gliding around in the ghostly gloom of blue tinted lights preparing for the after-theater rush.

Nicky, the proprietor, wasn't around, so Clague

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started to investigate on his own. He began with the cloak-room girl. She welcomed him with a mechanical smile.

"Miss Florente come in yet?"

The girl stopped her gum chewing long enough to shake her head sideways.

"Where's her dressing room?"

The girl leaned over the half-door of the coat room and pointed to a narrow corridor leading off the far end of the dining room.

"First door at the left," she said.

"Mr. Martinez still here?"

"No." The girl's lips grimaced contempt.

"He's that kind, eh?"

There was no reply.

"Where was his dressing room?"

"Second beyond Miss Florente's." The girl's disdain for everything connected with Rodriguez was being extended to include Clague.

"Anyone using it?"

"No."

A five-dollar bill changed hands.

"Thank you," the girl said, surprised.

"I don't like Martinez any more than you do. Anything you can tell me about him will give that bill a twin."

"He never did nothing to me," the girl said stolidly.

"It's what he didn't do, then," Clague answered.

She might have been a good-looking girl except

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for her complexion. Clague's remark brought a flush to her face which helped a lot.

"Funny how a hair cut and a massage can make a sheik out of a gutter rat," Clague murmured. "How many meals did you buy for him, sister?"

The girl's cheeks flamed. She chewed vigorously, started to say, "That bas—," continued with "when he was nobody" and finished by demanding, "What's that to you?"

"Nothing."

Clague skirted the dining room and reached the dressing room corridor. He didn't have to try the locked door of Felicia's darkened room to know it was empty. Rodriguez' was a different matter. The door was open and Clague walked in and switched on the light.

The room was as empty as if a vacuum cleaner had gone over every square inch. Under the dressing table, squashed in a corner, Clague found a torn section of newspaper. He picked it up and flattened it out. It was a jagged portion of a page of the Sunday *Times* classified section. Clague stuffed it in his pocket, gave another quick glance around to be sure nothing had escaped his notice, turned off the light and left the room.

Nicky, a short, square dark man with a perpetual scowl, was standing in front of the private office next to the cloak room when Clague got back. He greeted Clague sullenly and managed to articulate an unconvincing "Glad to see you" between puffs of a six-inch manilla.

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"Hear you've lost an entertainer," Clague said.

"Them damned adagio dancers," Nicky said. "You can't never depend on them."

"This boy was good, I hear."

"Yeah?" Nicky smirked. "Depends on what for."

"He had the makings of a great artist."

"He wasn't a bad hoofer but he'd never keep Rudy Vallée awake with jealousy over his singing."

"You paid him good dough."

"More than he was worth. The skirts liked him. Especially the old dames. Said he made them feel motherly."

Clague bent over closely.

"Any idea where he blacked out to?"

"No."

"Or why?"

"Search me."

"What was his racket?"

"Frails, I guess. Anyone with jack."

"Blackmail?"

A startled look flashed over Nicky's eyes.

"There's a regular gang chiseling," Clague continued. "They put Ormsby on the spot this morning."

Nicky shrugged his shoulders.

"Too bad," he said. "He was a good guy with never a care in the world till about two weeks ago. Then he suddenly began dragging a patsy around with him."

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"And I understand there's more paying through the nose."

People were beginning to come through the foyer. Nicky pulled Clague into the office, leaving the door partly open. From a desk drawer he pulled out a flask and extended it to Clague.

"My private brand," he said.

Clague took a long drink.

"I'll say it's not the prune juice you sell."

Nicky shrugged again.

"I get that cut."

"And then cut it some more."

"At what they soak me for it, I have to."

"Know where I can get stuff like this?" Clague tilted again.

"You can't."

Clague finished the flask. A girl in a flaming red dress who was passing looked in and snickered. Clague waved the empty flask.

"I'd offer you some but there isn't any more," he said.

The man she was with passed on. Clague turned to Nicky, who was eyeing him speculatively.

"Come to cases."

"What do you want?"

"Not blackmailers. Where'd you pick up this sheik?"

Nicky gestured toward the cloak room.

"She brought him in and asked me to give him a chance. I did."

"Then what happened?"

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"There was a hell of a row. I don't exactly know. She"—pointing to the cloak room—"won't talk."

"But Felicia horned in."

Nicky shrugged his shoulders again.

"Does she seem to be missing him much?"

"Felicia? That—" Nicky pronounced an unprintable word. "A new one comes around and blotto. All she misses around here is a madam."

"Thanks," said Clague, and rose to leave.

"Was that all you wanted?"

"Not quite, but you've given me some new ideas."

An idea struck Nicky and he ran in front of Clague, removing the manilla long enough to say:

"Listen, if you're thinking of digging up that pimp, don't do it on my account. His women cause more trouble than a menagerie of wildcats and he didn't bring in so much business at that."

"Thanks," Clague said again.

When he got out into the dining room all the tables adjoining the dance floor were filled and some of the rear ones were being taken. He saw the light gleaming under the door of Felicia's dressing room the minute he reached the corridor.

"Who is it?" her voice said in answer to Clague's knock. A moment later the door opened about three inches and her face peered through. A flimsy chemise was pressed in front of her. She saw Clague and said, "Oh, it's you."

"Yes. I want a picture of your pretty boy. You don't expect me to yank him out of a crowd without knowing what he looks like."

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"How stoopid of me."

The door slammed in Clague's face. He heard Felicia rustling around inside and put his ear close to the door. He drew back as it was reopened just far enough to let out a bare arm holding a photograph in its fingers.

Clague pulled the arm, drawing Felicia's face close to the opening.

"Who's in there?" he asked.

"No one."

"You're a cheap liar."

Clague turned away. Before he stuffed the picture in his pocket he took a look at it. It was a flashing face, good-looking in a way yet self-willed and weak. Clague knew the type.

He found an obscure table against the trellis wall that extended from the dressing room corridor. As he sat down, a waiter approached to take his order but Clague waved him away.

In one corner a large party were broadcasting their whoopee to the apparent disgust of their neighbors. Smaller groups were spread over the room, drinking or dancing.

The whiskey and the flickering lights were making Clague sleepy. He had a hazy idea that the dancing had stopped and the entertainment was on. Anreyneyeff led the opening chorus and then did a ballet solo. Felicia, clad in a one-piece orange bathing suit, sang "Sing to the Moon" and did it well enough to get an encore.

The entertainment was about over when Clague

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came to with a start. Dunlop and Greavy stood at the entrance to the dining room. They didn't see him. Their gaze was concentrated upon a small table where four people were sitting. One of the party Clague recognized as Oswald Hatton, a Broadway playboy who had made his family inheritance safer by building up a substantial publishing business. Clague noted that while the other three at the table were drinking steadily, Hatton was not. He toyed frequently with the glass in front of him. Once he actually raised it to his lips, but he set it down before it reached them.

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# Chapter V

THE music stopped and a scantily clad chorus raced for the dressing room. Dunlop and Greavy picked their way between the crowded tables toward the spot where Hatton and his party were seated. Clague eased out of his chair and edged, unseen, toward the foyer. He got there just as the lights went on. Many instruments blared the opening bars of "Two Little Blue Little Eyes" and swaying couples filled the dance floor.

The check room girl was out of sight and there was no one in the foyer. Clague gave a quick look around and then, hand in his hip pocket, entered the private office. Nicky was sprawled over the front of an open roll-top desk. His head was buried upon both arms. Clague walked behind him, lifted his right arm and extracted a .32 automatic from the clenched fingers.

"So they played the big Broadway shot for a sucker," he said. "Did you know Hatton was to be here tonight?"

Nicky's teeth chattered like a monkey's and he couldn't answer.

"Dunlop and Greavy are in there."

"I—k-know," Nicky stammered. His hands shook as if they were ague-stricken. Clague reached over his shoulders, picked up a package of cigarettes,



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looked at Nicky's thick, sagging lips, set them down and brought out some from his own pocket. He lit one and planked himself down in an arm chair.

"God, you're good. You play with dynamite and then turn yellow when it threatens to explode."

Nicky raised his swarthy face on one hand. His voice was hoarse. "They don't dare start anything around here."

"Why not?" Clague asked amicably.

"B-b-because I'll stop them."

"You're kidding yourself," Clague told him. "The only thing you'll stop—if you're not careful—is a soft-nosed bullet. But I don't think they'll start anything tonight."

"W-w-what makes you t-t-think so?" Nicky asked hopefully.

"Things are too well planted; and they know it."

Nicky gave a gasp of helplessness. His short frame shuddered like a rammed destroyer. "God, it's awful," he whispered.

"What is?"

Getting no reply Clague rose, chirped "Still step-brothers?" and started for the door.

"I've spent four years building up this place," Nicky blurted as he hurried forward to halt Clague's leaving. "Every cent I've got in the world is sunk in it."

"I don't want a financial statement," Clague reminded him.

"How was I to know there was anything phony about it? They came to me nice enough. All dif-

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ferent fellows at different times. I don't know yet which was in and which was out. And they'd all always spent plenty of dough. All they wanted to know was who was this or that person sitting around."

"And you told them?"

"Why not?"

"Ormsby was one they asked about?"

"Yeah. It was seeing his name in the paper so soon after that got me leary."

"Hatton another?"

"Uh-huh."

"Any of the chiseling mob around tonight?"

"Naw. They haven't been around for a week."

"Who were they?" Clague demanded.

Nicky's answer was a convulsive collapse on the desk. He was panic-stricken and his hands, winding and unwinding, stuck to the edges of the desk as if they had clutched sticky lollypops. Clague decided for him by yanking his head back and slapping him soundly on both cheeks.

"Snap out of it."

"I d-don't k-know."

"They spent dough here?"

"L-l-lots."

Clague jeered derisively. "With your nose for mazuma, any time you don't know the name of the guy who has the money it's because you've learned first that he's got smallpox, cholera or leprosy."

"Th-they gave me n-names."

"That's better."

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"One was J-jack S-smith."

"Huh."

"Another was H-hal Gr-gray."

"That's enough." Clague got the door half-open but Nicky rushed by and squeezed his bulk in Clague's departing path. Perspiration was running down his frightened face.

"Chees, Bernie, you got to believe me," he whimpered. "Ain't I always been on the up and up with you? I never seen them guys before. And can I help it if they slipped me tin dukes?"

Clague sized him up disgustedly.

"You're either the damndest liar I ever met," he said, "or the dumbest cluck. Who have they got planted here?"

"Here?" Nicky looked up bewildered.

"I guess the dumb cluck wins. Is your Spanish prima donna in on it?"

"Who? Felicia?"

"Maybe you've got me fooled," Clague admitted, "but I'll try again. Who's in her dressing room tonight?"

"Someone new. I never saw him before."

A man passed the door on the way to the cloak room. Clague straightened up, the light of surprised understanding dawning on him.

"That's him," Nicky whispered.

From an angle Clague looked through the half-open door and called: "Good evening, Mr. Panti-gras."

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Pantigras turned, a medium-sized man whose face scowled under twitching eyes that were partly covered by a glen of bushy black eyebrows. He was patently annoyed at the recognition, but he tried to conceal his irritation by a feline grin that disclosed two rows of pearl-white teeth.

"Good evening, Mr. Clague. I hadn't expected to meet you here."

"Nor I you."

"I dropped in momentarily to keep an appointment with a friend. I'm leaving now; but I shall get in touch with you in the morning, Mr. Clague."

With pompous dignity he adjusted a silk scarf around his neck, slipped into the coat the check room girl held, grasped his hat and ascended the street steps.

"Cheap skate," the untipped girl muttered. Nicky wasn't looking. She spat her gum after Pantigras' departing figure.

Within a minute of the Greek's disappearance Felicia came rushing through the foyer, a brocade wrap thrown hurriedly over her evening gown. She was in such a hurry that she failed to see Clague standing in the half-open door as she dashed up the stairs.

Clague followed.

He made the street in time to see two women, in uneven battle, the center of a growing circle of chauffeurs and midnight loiterers. One was Felicia and the other the girl of the squirrel coat.

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"You will tell me what you have done with him," Felicia screamed. She clawed viciously with pink enameled nails for the other's hair, but missed.

The girl in the squirrel coat was an amateur at this kind of warfare. Handicapped by inexperience she backed up until she stood at bay against a water hydrant. The crowd was thickening and it was time that someone intervened. Clague shoved his six feet between the two combatants.

"Now, girls," he remonstrated, "behave."

It stopped them for a moment. Clague tipped his hat and bowed low.

"Miss O'Lally, I believe," he said ironically.

A mute movement of her lips was her acknowledgment.

Clague's entrance had provided only a short-lived truce. Felicia's ardor, instead of cooling, was being whetted by the only capacity audience she had ever played to.

"You will tell me or I will scratch out your eyes," she threatened. She made a vicious dash for the other girl but Clague caught her around the waist and held her, kicking and clawing, in midair.

"Who?" he asked Miss O'Lally. His lips formed the unspoken word "Pantigras." The girl nodded.

"Thief," Felicia yelled, her arms waving in circles.

"What happened to him?"

"He drove away."

Clague surveyed the faces about him, then looked up and down on both sides of the street.

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"Well, wherever he's gone he's not around here." He set Felicia down and she promptly kicked Miss O'Lally in the shins.

"Liars—both of you," she screamed, and spat at her opponent. Clague gripped her around the shoulders and swung her toward the cabaret entrance.

"I've stood all of this I want to," he stormed. "Back to your kennel. Scram."

A bluecoat Clague knew was jostling his way through the cordon of onlookers. "I can handle this," Clague told him, and gave Felicia a shove that sent her through the cleared passageway to the head of the stairs. She kept on going down. The bluecoat moved along.

Clague fingered a badge in the glare of lights.

"Beat it," he told the crowd. They drifted away slowly in small groups.

Clague waited until the street had resumed its normal quiet, then led Miss O'Lally about thirty feet up the block away from the entrance glare.

"What happened?" was his first question.

"I had an appointment with Mr. Pantigras here. He came out hurriedly and said he was in a jam and I'd better not get mixed up in it. He drove off and left me here. Then that woman ran out."

"I know the rest," Clague said, but there was more he wanted to know.

"I'd better take you home."

"Don't bother, Mr. Clague," the girl answered. Her mind was functioning again. "My driver is at the corner. He can see me from here."

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She waved her arm in the air. A car that had been parked unostentatiously at the opposite curb began an eight-cylinder purr. It swung slowly across the street and stopped in front of Clague and the girl. Without making an attempt to get out, the driver crooked a hand along the side and opened the rear door.

"Thank you, Mr. Clague, and good night."

Clague laughed.

"It's not going to be as easy as that this time," he started. Then he stopped. For the first time he was aware of another figure in the rear of the car, a figure that was shifting toward him until the light made the features visible above the delicate silk shawl. The face was genteel and elderly, topped by billowy, snow-white hair.

Its owner bowed graciously.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Clague," she said in a sweet, grandmotherly voice, "for being so kind to my little girl."

"But I really want to—"

"I couldn't dream of permitting it," Miss O'Lally interrupted. She even smiled impudently.

Clague's head and shoulders were leaning through the open door. Three men who had, apparently, been on the point of strolling by, came up behind him without attracting his attention. One stood at each side and another at his back.

"Get in, Clague," one said. The voice was a whispered threat. There was a metal barrel pressing into Clague's side.

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At the words Miss O'Lally jerked upright. Clague saw her face, tense and strained.

"Nito," she protested indignantly.

"Shut up," Baby Face warned.

"How dare you?"

"Keep that trap closed."

"You've no right to speak to me like that."

"I haven't. Suppose I take it. Or suppose," he said insinuatingly, "you've just given it to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not blind, sister. This guy knows too much. You know he does. Still you let him hang around. Maybe you're getting soft. Well, I'm not."

"You're overstepping yourself, Nito. You'll hear of this."

"Mebbe. Right now the best you can do is keep quiet."

Baby Face turned his attention to Clague. Practiced hands went over Clague's clothes and relieved him of his revolver.

"What's the idea?" Clague asked without turning. He was watching Miss O'Lally tear a small handkerchief into pieces.

"Inside, you."

Clague clambered in and took the middle seat. Miss O'Lally started to give the driver instructions. Baby Face shoved her back with such force that she bounced against the rear cushion.

"He's taking orders from me," he said. They drove off, Baby Face in the front seat with his gun pressed against the driver's arm. The guards fol-

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lowed in another car. It picked up speed as it neared the park and Miss O'Lally found her voice.

"I'm frightened," she whispered in choked syllables.

"Why?"

"They've never dared talk like that before."

"Why now?"

"I'll find out. There's something behind it. My understanding has always been that I'm not to be interfered with—as long as I produce results."

Her voice had risen and Baby Face rapped on the window as a signal to stop the chatter.

Clague looked away. "Riding on the crest," he murmured. "Sitting in the driver's seat." He looked back and stopped. Tears were welling in Miss O'Lally's eyes.

They were on the Drive, going at forty-five, when there was a warning shout and a sudden grinding of brakes. A taxicab, sliding out of a side street, cut directly in front of them. They sideswiped it, swinging it into a lamp-post. The next minute was a confusion of rending wood, splintering glass, the screams of passengers and the oaths of drivers.

The taxicab was partly caved in, with a big dent in its middle. The cabriolet, glass shattered, had turned half around in the collision. Baby Face had been on the side receiving the full force of the smash. He had been hurled clear of the car and was lying on the pavement, dazed. Clague gave the situation a swift survey. Miss O'Lally was un-

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hurt and there was no point in creating a mob scene. He opened the door and slipped out quietly.

"Walk, don't run," he muttered to himself as he hurried to the corner. Once around it he raced two blocks until he found a parked taxicab. He gave the driver his Twelfth Street address.

During the twenty-minute drive home he speculated on the evening's happenings without getting anywhere. When he entered the doorway of his house he noticed that lamps were lit in the living room and the disorder of the morning had been cleared up. Jasper, still bent, but far from broken, was leaning over a boiling kettle in front of the living room fireplace.

"Your tea is ready, sir," he said imperturbably.

Clague sat down and for five minutes sipped in silence from the cup Jasper had poured out. Then he suddenly demanded: "Where the hell have you been?"

"I was unavoidably detained for a while," Jasper replied, "but I managed to get away. And I heard some things I wasn't supposed to."

"All right. Spill it."

Instead of answering directly Jasper straightened up until he stood almost erect.

"You haven't got the pearls?" he asked.

"No."

Jasper's head wagged meditatively.

"The gang won't believe that. The pearls belonged to a girl, Felicia Florente."

"Talk sense," Clague snapped.

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"She had a sweetie. He's disappeared. But no matter who had the pearls, the gang feels you've got them."

"Those aren't the pearls—" Clague caught himself. He paced the floor. "It still doesn't make sense," he said.

"And I'm hoping, sir," Jasper continued, "you'll overlook my defections and let me stay on here. I'd really like to very much, sir."

Clague plugged on the radio, got a Greenwich Village orchestra booming jazz, plugged off, picked a panetela from the humidor on the table, bit off the end, lit a match, then changed his mind and threw the cigar into the fireplace. He started for the stairs. At the door he turned as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"Stay? You want to stay?" he said. "Sure. Go ahead. Stay."

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# Chapter VI

CLAGUE walked into the precinct police station at ten the following morning for the Medical Examiner's inquest on Schlemborn's death. Dunlop and Greavy were there. Also Stern, the hotel clerk, and the bellhop, the elevator operator, the fingerprint expert and the police surgeon.

Their combined testimonies made a story with which Clague was already familiar. The fingerprints had led nowhere. The only new development was that the hat found in the room vacated by the murderer had been bought at a store on East Fourteenth Street where dozens of unrecorded sales were made daily. The size of the hat was six and three-quarters. Clague noted that. Schlemborn, with his massive brow and bushy hair, had worn a seven and three-eighths.

After the last witness was through Dunlop and the Medical Examiner held a whispered consultation. Then the Medical Examiner announced that, in the public interest, the hearing would be adjourned indefinitely and warned the witnesses not to disappear. Before the last words of the warning were out of his mouth, Clague was edging his way to the door, anxious to get out before Dunlop could grab him. An idea that had been lurking in his



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mind refused to be downed and he jumped into a taxi headed for home.

Jasper was there straightening the living room.

"Where'd they take you?" Clague asked abruptly.

Jasper's eyes registered blankness.

"The top floor of a six-story walk-up with no way of looking out. That's all I know, sir."

"Blindfolded both ways?"

"Yes, sir."

"But you got away?"

"I could hear some of the talk. In the room on the other side was another man. When the new shift came after dark they were to drive him away and free him. I don't think any of them knew him well. I changed places with him."

"Door unlocked?"

"No, sir, but"—apologetically—"that don't mean much to me."

"He was willing?"

"He didn't have much to say about it. He was all right about changing clothes but it upset him when I bound him and stuck a gag in his mouth. You see, sir, he'd given me his word not to shout."

"But you couldn't take chances?"

"Naturally not. Even with the similarity in height and the coat collar up and the hat rim down it was something of a risk, sir. But I don't believe it ever occurred to them he could be anyone else."

"Where'd they drop you?"

"End of the subway at Van Cortlandt. They gave

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me a nickel and said riding home in the subway ought to be a new experience for me."

Clague's face froze, but his eyes sparkled.

"Rich stuff, eh?"

"A real toff, I'd say. Thin gray hair and the mildest blue eyes. I'll never forget the hurt look he gave me when I made him take the gag."

"You'd know him again?"

"Any day, sir."

Clague suddenly jumped to his feet and said: "I've got to be moving." At the doorway he stopped: "Don't let them get you again, Jasper."

The man patted a hip pocket. "I'm looking out for that, sir. Maybe you'd better, too."

"Meaning—?"

"That gang keeps after what it wants."

"What stopped them Monday night?"

Jasper shrugged.

"The girl?" Clague asked and kept going, without waiting for a reply.

Outside the house he walked two blocks and then signaled a cab. The address he gave the driver was on East Twenty-second Street. It turned out to be a two and a half story brick house suffering from the accumulated abuse of fifty years. Ashcans and débris littered the street and pieces of rags and broken bottles lined the basement areaway. Like every other house in the block it had a "Vacancies" sign on the front entrance.

Clague rang the bell and waited three minutes before the door was opened by a tired-looking woman

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