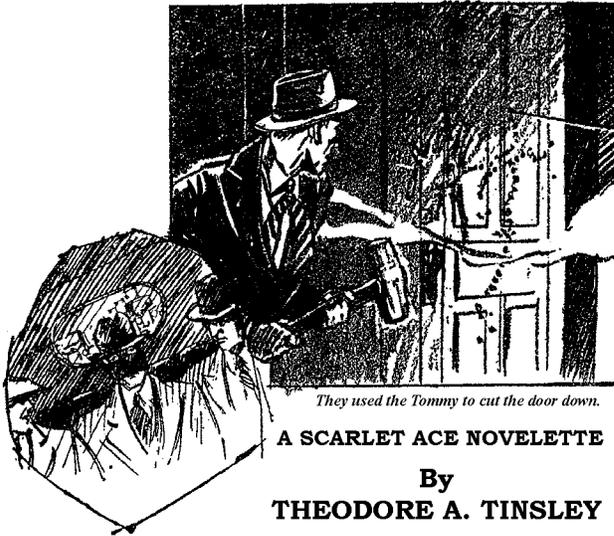


CANDIDATE FOR DEATH



They used the Tommy to cut the door down.

A SCARLET ACE NOVELETTE

**By
THEODORE A. TINSLEY**



**HIRED GUNS GAVE THEIR WOLF
CRY WHEN THE SCARLET ACE
PASSED THE WORD, BUT THEY FOR-
GOT THE LAW OF THE PACK UNTIL
THEY PAID THE PRICE OF FEAR.**



THE knocking on the door was softly urgent. An insistent little tattoo of bunched knuckles. Silence followed. Then the sound began again. Rap, rap, rap! There was something restrained and deadly in that furtive signal on the outside of the locked door of Room 708.

Tough Tony Farino had sharp animal-like ears and he was positive that the elevator door hadn't clanged once in the last twenty minutes. There had been no telephone call from the hotel desk downstairs. Whoever was outside in the dingy corridor had come up to the seventh floor without attracting attention; had gumshoed through the lobby, probably, and climbed the fire-stairs on tiptoe.

The girl, Ethel, glared wordlessly at Tony. Her hard eyes were bright with warning.

Farino frowned reassuringly at her. He rose catlike to his feet. The blue-steel gleam of a stubby automatic projected snoutlike from his grimy fist. He took a noiseless step toward the door.

The soft rapping sound began again.

Farino waited. When the knocking ceased he pressed his flat ear cautiously against the inside of the panel. He listened, his eyes gleaming.

He said, throatily, "Who is it? Whaddye want?"

"Okay, Tony! Open up!"

A swift jerk of Tony's head sent the girl tiptoeing to a rear corner of the room where she crouched behind a battered oak dresser. Farino grinned as he saw her slide a toy-size weapon out of her handbag. The kid was sure a strong-jawed jane; better in a rough and tumble brawl than a lotta soft-bellied mugs who called themselves hard

guys. His eyes said to her silently: "Attagirl!"

Farino himself was no slob in any man's town. He was a paid killer, a hired rod. He had rolled in from Boston that very very morning to glom a little pocket-money—an even ten grand.

Ten grand for a rub-out was pretty good dough, even for a sure-thing artist like Tony. His nostrils flared with pleasure as he thought of it in the Pullman speeding from Boston. His first, real break in the Big Town! A swell chance to chisel into fast company. The Scarlet Ace was a name to conjure with in Tony's business. He'd show the Big Fella that when it came to iced guts Tough Tony's innards were way below freezing point.

A photograph of the man he had come to kill was in his inside coat pocket. Tony didn't like his proposed victim's— name—John Tattersall Lacy. Sounded like manicured fingernails and silk underwear. A cake-eater with a little blond mustache who didn't know what it was all about. Wotta laugh! A magazine full of soft lead pumped into a soft belly and a swell chance to play big-time ball with the Scarlet Ace.

Thoughts like this had made Tony's chest swell pleasantly on the old rattler from Boston. But now, in a cheap hotel hideout that no one was supposed to know about; with someone out in the corridor rapping softly for admission. Tough Tony had a swift moment of dismay, a faint pin-prick of fear in the nerve cords of his spine. It vanished in a wave of killer's conceit. If the mug outside was a nosy; dick, it'd be just too bad; he'd yank him inside, burn him and scam down the fire-escape to the back alley with the girl friend. Farino was a great guy for figuring his out. He had tabbed that

alley down below before he had been two minutes in the room.

Farino turned the key suddenly, threw the door open. The snout of his gun was like solid rock.

His jaw dropped with a stupid wonder. There was no face peering at him. Only the visitor's back was visible. The visitor was staring down the hall toward the silent elevator shaft. Now he turned around.

Farino gasped. Neither of the two men said a word. The killer's gun hand wavered. He backed up a step. The visitor followed him into the room, closed the door softly, turned the key. A man without a face.

The intruder said, in a muffled and remote voice: "What the hell's the idea keeping me waiting?"

The silken mask seemed to stifle his utterance, made it sound wooden, almost expressionless. The mask covered his entire face, hung well below his chin. There were two narrow slits for eye-holes. The lower half of the mask rose and fell lightly with the unhurried rhythm of his breathing. The mask was the color of blood—bright red.

"The Scarlet Ace!" Farino growled hoarsely.

"What's the idea keepin' me waiting?"

"Jeeze, boss, I never dreamed—I had me orders from Katz where he gimme the photograph in Boston."

"Shut up! Who told you to come clean? You're not in Boston now, Tony. Don't spill your guts till you're asked. Who's this moll with you? Some tramp you picked up on the train?"

Farino's face darkened.

"Listen guy; I don't take guff like that from nobody. Not even from you. The kid is my business; and if you think you're gonna——"

The Scarlet Ace slapped the gun viciously to one side with his open palm. His right fist clenched and Farino stepped back hastily.

"Your business?" said the menacing voice. "Since when?"

He walked to; the window and, pulled down the shade.

He said to the girl, "You Farino's woman?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I don't want you here. Pack up and get the hell out!"

"Oh, yeah?" She sounded scared, uncertain. Her fringed and sticky eyelashes blinked appealingly at Tony.

"Waita-minute!" Farino growled.

"Shut up! Did Katz tell you to bring your floozie along?"

"No, but——"

"That was your own idea, eh? Well, I don't mind telling you. it's lousy. I brought you here to bump a guy, and you show up with a blond honey-ball. You're here to get hot with a rod, brother, and nothing else. Slip the girl-friend her return stub to Boston."

"I didn't buy no returns," Farino muttered. "I figgered we'd stick around."

THE Scarlet Ace drew a small roll of bills from his pocket and tossed it on the table.

"Pack your bag," he told: the girl curtly. "Take a cab over to Newark and grab the first trimotored job that flies to Boston."

She stood with a hand on one hip, a sneering smile twisting the brilliant carmine of her lips. Her lovely mouth framed an inaudible gutter word.

She turned to Tony. "Tell him. It's no dice! We're not fadin' his bet. Tell this big shot in the false-face to go spit up a rope."

Farino wet his thick lips. The slits in the silken mask were like blind gashes watching him. The mask fluttered and the hidden voice said, "Well?"

Tony shrugged. He blinked at the money on the table. He muttered to the girl, "Pack up, Baby."

"What!"

"You heard me. Pack up and scram."

"Why, you dirty, yeller——" Rage twisted her painted doll's face. She squalled a string of oaths, spat out snake-like words at him. He walked over to her, twisted the toy gun out of her hand, clapped a dirty palm over her mouth.

"Don't be a Dumb Dora," he said thickly. "Take your runout powder to Boston like a good kid. I'll send fer yuh in a coupla days. No kiddin'. We, gotta use brains, honey. We're in the Big Town"

"Sure we are," she spluttered. "Yuh didn't think we was in Milwaukee, did yuh?"

There were tears in her eyes. She had shot her bolt and the storm was over. She said, sullenly, "That's, a hell of a note!" and the curve of her lovely bosom rose and fell with the slow dregs of anger and disappointment. Pretty as a picture, Farino thought hotly. He swung his big arm about her body and crushed her till she yelped. He kissed the smooth skin below her ear and released her with a little shove.

"Play ball, honey," he mumbled appealingly.

She nodded after a while and began tossing articles into her small traveling bag. She scooped the roll of bills off the table. The weight of her packed bag made her grimace.

"Am I supposed to lug this thing? How 'bout a bell-hop?"

The masked intruder said briefly, "No."

She said to him, in a spiteful snarl: "I could love you in a big way, Mister!" and swished to the door.

Tough Tony held the door open on a brief crack till the elevator grill clanked and the whirl of its descent ceased.

At the curbstone down in the street the girl flashed her best "poor little me" smile and allowed an admiring hackman to stow her bag away. He helped her into the cab with a little squeeze on her arm.

The cab rolled. After at discreet interval a second cab meshed gears and accelerated. The girl went straight to the airport in Newark and bought a ticket. The passenger in the second car saw her go out to the runway and climb with a flash of silken calves to the cabin of a scheduled tri-motored transport.

When the ship was a silver dot over the Bronx the man, who had trailed Tough Tony's moll grinned with satisfaction. He could report the simple fact that she was gone. That suited the trailer. The guy he worked for liked to hear facts. Just plain facts. And accurate.

CHAPTER II STALKING SHADOWS

IN THE locked hotel room marked 708, the Scarlet Ace said tonelessly: "Ten grand's a pretty good day's Pay, eh, Tony?"

"It's fair."

"Think you can earn it?"

Farino chuckled. His laugh sounded like, the drip of oil.

"I'm here, ain't I?" He added curiously, "Got any new orders? I kinda expected——"

"No. You got the play from Katz, didn't you?"

"Yeah,"

"All right. Follow it. I just stepped around to cut the moll loose. I like a man who works for me to keep his mind on. business."

Tough Tony laughed again. "What'd yuh do—tab me in from Boston?"

"I hear things," said the masked man grimly. "Studied the photograph, have you?"

"Sure. Just a pushover. A sap."

The Scarlet Ace grunted. "Just, a pushover. That's, why I'm paying, you ten grand. I love to spend money."

Farino thrust out his lower lip belligerently.

"I seen soldier boys, before. One of 'em tried to cleanup, Philly, once."

"This soldier's different. He don't go to court with a case. He kills people. Ever hear of a secret outfit called Amusement, Incorporated?"

The gunman shrugged. "No skin offa my nose," he scowled. "I'm here to collect ten grand by bumpin' a guy named John Tattersall Lacy." He repeated the name in mocking falsetto. "What a monicker!" His voice rasped. "I'll hand him an extra slug jest for that middle name o' his! When's the party come off?"

"Tonight, I think. I've got to line him up first. He's a cagy sucker."

"Tonight will be just lovely," Farino sneered. "What'll I do, boss? Take the bus like Katz said?"

"I don't know yet. If I change the picture I'll buzz you on the phone in plenty of time. What'd Katz say? Did you memorize my orders?"

Tony chuckled.

"And how. Like takin' a trip to Coney Island. Me an' Ethel laughed about it all the way in from Boston. I'm to take a cab down to Madison Square where the Number T'ree buses start. I'm to grab the first Number T'ree bus that pulls out after 9 P. M. and mooch a seat on top. Am I right or am I right?"

"Go ahead. And don't get so damned funny about it."

"OKAY. At Fiftieth and Fifth there's a guy standin' on the corner with a red flower in his buttonhole. If he ain't there I stay on the bus an' hole up here again till tomorrer night ——"

"He'll be there," said the man in the mask. "Shoot. Got the rest straight?"

"Sure. I jest foller the bum down to Forty-ninth an' halfway through the block; an' he stops; an' I say, 'Got a match, Mac?' Accordin' to this mug, Katz, there's a car waitin' in Forty-ninth an' me an' the boy-friend pile in, an' he slips cheaters on me so I won't see where I'm goin'. Screwy in my language."

"They're my orders," said the muffled voice

savagely.

"Okay by me. For ten grand I'll show up in me drawers an' bark like a dog!"

He laughed shortly and fished for a cigaret. The Scarlet Ace flipped open a platinum enameled case and extended it.

"Try tobacco for a change," he sneered.

Tough Tony lit a fag from the case and blew a funnel of gray smoke.

"I still don't get all the big mystery stuff."

"Use your head, Farino. Do you think I tip my headquarters to every punk I import into New York for a job? Maybe you'll click tonight and maybe you won't. If the deal flops you go out of my headquarters the same way you came in—blindfolded. You're in no position to rat on me. And Tony——"

The voice crawled with menace!

"That's a break for you; not being able to rat."

The killer said vaguely: "Sure, sure!" His flat forehead was wrinkled as though in perplexity. He clicked his tongue and swallowed. His eyes looked glazed, uncertain. He rocked a little and regarded the ash on his cigaret with owlish gravity.

He whispered in foggy alarm: "Say, listen.... What th'..."

His eyelids closed. His body bent suddenly at the waist and pitched forward.

The masked man sprang catlike, without a sound, caught the unconscious killer as he fell and eased him to the floor. He picked up the cigaret from the carpet, pinched out the glow and dropped it into his pocket.

The shade on the window was still drawn. With a muscular heave he flopped Farino on the bed and composed him for untroubled slumber.

For a moment he stood tense, listening. Then he jerked off the scarlet mask. Farino's mouth was wide open; he looked like a hippo; a hippo with gold bridges work and brown, tobacco-stained molars.

The intruder said softly: "You're not so tough."

He searched him carefully; found nothing he wanted; took nothing at all from him. There was a calendar on the wall and he ripped off the topmost sheet and scribbled a message on the blank side:

Sorry to leave you this way. No one ever sees my face and I can't walk out of this dump with a mask on—hence the drugged cigaret. You'll be okay in a couple of hours. Keep your Mouth shut and obey my orders.

THE SCARLET ACE.

The room-key was still in the lock on the inside. The visitor went out, locked the door on the outside and tossed the key through the open transom. He heard it bounce on the carpet with a dull thud.

The elevator shaft was down the hall, close to a turn in the dim corridor. The stealthy figure passed the empty shaft and descended the fire-stairs silently to the fifth floor. He whipped out a key and let himself into a room.

A spare little man with a crab-apple face laid down a big blue gun on the dresser and grinned.

The little man whispered eagerly: "How did it work?"

"Like a charm, my dear Charles. Like a seven-jewel charm," said John Tattersall Lacy.

THEY grinned at each other, did Weaver and Lacy. The two field officers of Amusement, Inc. were alike in the quality and coloring of their eyes—blue ice under moonlight. By all other standards they were different.

Major Lacy was tall, well knit, supple as a whip. Thin lips, sensitive nostrils, a close-cropped sandy mustache. You looked at him and you thought polo, foxhunt, cavalry. He had served in France and you knew that too. In France they called him the Iron Major. Plenty of good soldiers had died in his machine-gun battalion. But no man of his command died because of stupidity or bungling. He was a gallant and shrewd leader.

Charlie Weaver had served under him as a company commander, as captain. He was short, nervous, fidgety. He looked more like an insurance adjuster than an ex-captain of marines. But Lacy knew better. When the Emergency Council for Crime Control called upon him to lead a patriotic and secret war against criminals—death against death—the Iron Major made Charlie Weaver his chief of staff and he had never regretted it.

He clapped the little man softly on the shoulder. There was a deep bond of affection between the two.

"Are you certain you fooled him, Jack?" Weaver growled.

"Fool him?"

Tattersall Lacy smiled.

"My dear Charles, the fellow fairly begged to be fooled. Like all killers and paid assassins, Mr. Tough Tony Farino possesses a most—er—primitive type of intelligence. I had only to creep

upstairs, don a ridiculous red mask and talk as though I had catarrh—and he fell for the deception like a ton of bricks.”

His smile deepened.

“Luckily I got rid of the girl fairly easily. Had she stayed I’d been afraid to pump him. Women detect bluff quicker than a man will. You’re married, Charles, and I trust you’ll bear me out in that, eh? However, the girl Ethel left like a lamb.”

“Think she went straight back to Boston?”

“Pat Harrigan will tell us the answer, to that when we get back to the Cloud Building.”

Weaver’s nervous fingers twisted.

“Let’s shove off. Let’s get out of here.”

“No hurry at all, Captain,” Lacy said mildly. “That wretched oaf two floors above us will sleep like a log for a couple of hours. When he does awake I’ll wager he sits tight and keeps his dazed mouth shut. The name of the Scarlet Ace seems to work positive wonders in that respect.”

“I wish to God we could get our hands on that same damned Scarlet Ace!”

“Softly, Charles.... We will,” said Lacy cheerfully.

“Eh?”

“Tonight, little man, if the gods are good.”

Weaver fairly bounced with excitement.

“What do you mean? Did Farino—?”

“Farino did. He pumps quite easily. To be quite blunt he—er—spilled his guts very prettily. I expect to use him as a decoy duck tonight. We have a date with the Scarlet Ace—at his headquarters, Charles—and I sincerely hope he’s at home.”

“Where’s his headquarters this time? Did you find out?” Weaver rapped.

“Haven’t the foggiest. Not the slightest idea. Shall we leave that detail to Farino? I’m sure he’ll show us the way. . . . Quite ready, Charles?”

Tattersall Lacy picked up his light malacca stick, adjusted his Homburg hat a precise angle and unlocked the door.

He punched the elevator bell with the end of his cane and the two men rode down in the cage to the lobby.

“Good day, Mr. Major,” said the clerk and Lacy nodded genially to him.

He had registered earlier under the name of John Major.

The two men passed a rank of taxis and walked halfway down the block where a red-and-blue Paragon cab waited. A bronze-faced hackman threw open the door deferentially. He was Sergeant

Dillon, the major’s personal chauffeur. The custom-built cab he drove was a special job with braced chassis, concealed steel shutters and a racing motor under the deceptive hood.

This particular cab had seen some hot adventures since the hour of that quiet penthouse conference when Amusement, Incorporated, was born and christened so oddly by the major’s freakish humor. There was a paneled recess behind the chauffeur’s compartment. Inside it a Tommie gun hung on hard rubber hooks. Below, in a shallow drawer, were Mills bombs and a half dozen tear-gas projectiles. The whole arrangement was a bit of clever built-in camouflage.

To the casual eye the cab was just an ordinary looking hack with a scuffed paint job. The only unusual thing about it was that it never stopped for fares and paid no attention to the whistle tootings of infuriated doormen in comic-opera uniforms.

Lacy leaned forward in his seat and spoke in a low voice to Dillon.

“Did Mr. Harrigan follow a girl from the hotel, Sergeant?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Get us to headquarters immediately.”

The cab sprang away with a smooth leap and purred round the corner into traffic. Dillon eased over to Sixth Avenue and presently the cab slowed down. It turned in across a stone driveway at the rear of the towering Cloud Building. It descended a concrete vehicle ramp to the basement of the skyscraper.

CHAPTER III THE MAN IN A MASK

THERE was a bus terminal down there and a waiting-room and platform for Gray Goose passengers. Dillon drove through an archway well beyond the platform and halted in the gloomy repair shop of the bus line. At the far side, in a square concrete recess, were the closed doors of a small private garage.

Dillon got out and unlocked the doors, switched on a light and drove in. He busied himself with his motor and his two passengers alighted. The bronze panels were set flush in the surface of the inner wall. They slid apart at the major’s touch. Weaver followed Lacy into a tiny electric elevator. The doors closed.

The elevator rose silently through the heart of

the skyscraper toward the penthouse apartment at its very pinnacle. There was no perception of motion. Rose lamps in antique bronze fixtures bathed the interior of the car with a soft glow. Neither man spoke.

High above them the annunciator in the major's foyer began a peculiar clacking signal. *Tak, tak, tak, tak...*

When the car stopped the doors opened automatically. A civilian-clad marine stood on guard in the foyer with a rifle. He presented arms stiffly and went back to port arms. Lacy snapped him a curt salute.

A deft butler in sombre broadcloth took the major's hat, stick and overcoat and did the same for Weaver. Under the man's calm, respectful exterior there was an unmistakable hint of the military. As a matter of fact, Lacy had won him at cards in a lucky game with his friend. Captain Nigel Huntley of the Royal Air Force, back in those wild, reckless nights that followed the armistice.

"Has Mr. Harrigan returned yet, Hawkins?" Lacy asked him.

"Yes, sir. I believe he's in the library with Mr. Corning."

"Excellent. Come along, Charles."

A log fire was crackling in the big fireplace. A beefy, red-headed man with fists like hams sat idly toasting his shins before the fire. A stout man with a ruddy face was sprawled near by in a deep leather chair. The stoutish man was Ed Corning. The big Irishman with the over-sized hands was Pat Harrigan. Together with Charlie Weaver they formed the major's board of strategy for Amusement, Incorporated.

At sight of Lacy the big red-headed giant came forward with a rumbling sound of welcome. Pat had a voice like the wash of surf on rocks. There was no formality in these private councils of war that took place in the lofty beamed library of the penthouse.

"Howdy, Jack!" Harrigan roared. "Hello, Charlie! What are you grinning about? You look like a wizened little ape that's just found a cocoanut."

"Cocoanut, hell," Weaver rejoined. "Jack claims he's found the Scarlet Ace—or found out how to find him—or something."

Pat gave an Indian whoop of delight.

"Is that it? Then God be praised I was born in the south of Ireland!" He doubled up his right fist and looked at it speculatively as though it were a

small wormy chestnut. "I smell a grand bloody fight coming by the grace of Saint Monica!"

Lacy fixed him with a sober eye.

"Did you trace the girl when she left the hotel?"

"Yes. She went straight to Newark airport. Bought a ticket and left twenty minutes later for Boston in a scheduled transport ship."

"Splendid. That makes it easier to handle Farino."

Pat frowned.

"How about giving us the lowdown on this particular shindig, Jack? Was the undercover tip from the Council correct about Tough Tony Farino?"

"It was. The Scarlet Ace has brought him in from Boston to do a murder job. The price is ten thousand dollars, cash on delivery."

"And the victim?" Ed Corning asked dryly.

"Farino had a photograph in his inside coat pocket." The major smiled like the thin edge of a bolo knife. "The candidate for death is an ex-major of marines now actively engaged in the secret pursuit of criminals. A man named John Tattersall Lacy"

HE lit a long graceful panatella and blew fragrant smoke. Pat looked at him with a kind of loving awe.

"Did you actually pull the masquerade act? And how in the name of the seven blessed martyrs did you get him to spill the arrangements for the bump-off?"

"Not the actual bump-off, Pat. That hasn't been arranged yet so far as I know. But he did spill something damned, interesting for the ears of the Emergency Council. He gave me the lead, the tip-off, the open sesame, by Judas Priest!— to the hitherto undiscovered hangout of the kingpin of crime in New York, the latest headquarters of the Scarlet Ace.

"Where is it?" Corning cut in swiftly. Ed's sleepy eyes were wide open.

"I don't know yet."

"But you just said ——"

Tattersall Lacy waved his panatella grimly.

"Sit you down, gentlemen," he said in crisp command. "I'm going to tell you all I know at present. If any one of you asks a stupid question or makes me repeat a fact twice, I'll bar him from the adventure tonight. Is that clear? Very well..."

He frowned at the long expensive ash on his cigar tip.

"You know already about our undercover tip on Farino and his — er — paramour. Weaver and I went to the hotel as planned and engaged a room two floors below Farino. My theory about the killer from Boston was not very flattering to his intelligence but it had the merit of boldness and surprise—two cardinal virtues of military tactics. I had the advantage in that my every movement, tone of voice, my whole deception in fact, had been carefully considered in advance. By Jove, it was a sort of trench raid, except that instead of blacking up my face and hands I donned a red silk mask..."

He shrugged impatiently. Explanations always bored him.

"Briefly, gentlemen, here is what happened..."

TOUGH TONY FARINO swaggered out of the lobby of the hotel and stood a moment on the dark, windy sidewalk, idly picking his teeth. He looked as flashy as a glass diamond and as hard as Gibraltar. Tony had his own ideas about evening wear. He had on a derby, a light fawn-colored overcoat over a blue suit and cherry-colored shoes. He wore only one grey glove; the other he held bunched loosely in his gloved hand. Tony had seen a picture once in a theatre program of a guy who wore his gloves that way and it looked pretty classy to him.

He lit a cigaret and the cold night wind whipped at the sparks.

"Taxi, sir?" said the doorman.

Farino looked at him with a slow, Metropolitan air.

"Ixnay," he said courteously. "Jist takin' a stroll, see? A short stroll after me dinner."

He swaggered down to the corner and turned south on the avenue. He swaggered because he was puzzled, out of his depth. He still had a slight headache as a memento of the Scarlet Ace's visit. He felt like a sap. You could talk to the big shots in Boston—but this mug in the red mask! Tony felt a prickling of awe in his scalp as he recalled how easily the Scarlet Ace had given the bum's rush to Ethel. And Ethel was nobody's lap-dog, not in Boston, anyway.

The thought of Boston made Tony's lip curl. That was out from now on. The Big Town for Tony! He'd show this monkey in the trick mask that he had a first-class cannon on the payroll, a guy to play ball with in a big way. The ten grand for bumping Tattersall Lacy would be only a starter. As for the kid, Ethel— she could stay the

hell in Boston.

A daring idea made Farino lick his thick lips. He'd look around, get set, and grab off one of these perfumed broads from Park Avenue. A swell educated kid that high-hatted you in lace pajamas till you slapped her down and let her see who's who. After that she'd go for you like a roman candle. Tony's dark eyes glowed at the thought. He'd seen 'em in the movies; they went all soft and uh-uh for a hard guy who wouldn't take no.

He shot his cigaret butt out across the dark asphalt and signalled a rolling cab.

"Madison Square," he told the hackman.

The man took a quick, shrewd look at the overcoat and shoes.

"Yuh mean the Garden, Bud?"

"Listen, monkey; did I say Garden? Dig the dirt outa yer ears. I wanta go to Madison Square on Twenty-third Street."

He settled back on the cushions with a grunt. That was the way to talk to these wise mugs! Show 'em they weren't dealin' with a sap!"

He got out at Twenty-third, glanced at a street sign under a lamp and discovered that the dope had let him out on the wrong side of the park. He took a winding path past benches sparsely filled with shivering bums and walked up Fifth to the north end of the Square. There was a circular metal standard on the curb with a printed sign on it: NUMBER THREE BUSES START HERE.

Farino sat down on a bench and listened to the clock in the Metropolitan Tower chiming the quarter hour. At nine o'clock it chimed again. An empty bus rolled in presently and he got on and climbed to the upper deck.

The conductor was a laugh! He had a cute little plate on his uniform with his name on it: Mr. P. Gilhooley. He held out a little dingus and you shoved a dime in it, which the wise Mick promptly shook out and slipped in his pocket. Tony winked at him. "Okay wit' me, kid. Make all yuh kin."

He craned his head with a grunt of awe as the bus passed the Cloud Building. The lighted tower seemed to scrape the cold and distant stars. Jeeze, wotta dump that was!

As he neared Fiftieth his eyes narrowed watchfully. There was a man on the corner standing under the lamp in a brilliant circle of light. The man glanced idly at the approaching bus. He wore a small red flower in his lapel. Farino buzzed the signal bell, clattered down the steps and got off.

The man with the flower turned on his heel

and walked south at a fairly rapid pace.

At Forty-ninth he turned west and so did Farino.

The street was a dark, gloomy tunnel. The sidewalk was roofed over with timbers to prevent injury to pedestrians from the construction work of Radio City. The ground floor level was a series of dark, gaping holes, with watchman's fires burning here and there like windy will-o'-the-wisps.

Farino hastened his steps and the man ahead of him slowed down. A dark sedan stood at the curb a few paces onward.

Farino cleared his throat and obeyed instructions.

He said, hoarsely, "Got a match, Mac?"

"Okay," the other man nodded.

He was a paunchy, soft-looking man with a fat face and shrewed ferret eyes under straw-colored eyebrows.

He said: "Right on the dot, fella. Good stuff. The Big Guy likes that."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. And don't talk so tough, Farino. I gotta sore ear."

They walked to the quiet sedan and the two men got in the back. The chauffeur hunched around and cocked a sleepy eye at them.

"Where's the big shot's hangout?" Farino muttered. "Is that where we're goin'?"

"He's got a dozen joints, sweetheart. You're goin' to one of 'em. And if yuh got any more questions, call up information."

He pulled down the curtains and Farino submitted to being blind-folded.

"Oke?" said the driver.

The man with the light eyebrows said oke.

The sedan jumped away from the deserted curb and bored smoothly along at a careful legal speed.

There was plenty of traffic going south. Tires whined a steady song; horns tooted noisily. The lights ahead were like a long string of magic beads—presto, red! —presto, green! Cars turned in, turned out, an ever changing throng.

But there were a few cars that didn't change. An inconspicuous Chevy tailed the sedan for a while and then dropped back. A Pontiac breezed along for a half mile. There were at least two Paragon cabs in the procession. And farther back, in constant touch with the changing trailers, rolled a glossy closed delivery wagon that belonged to the Blue Front Grocery Stores.

Blue Front was a subsidiary of Continental

Foodstuffs. The chairman of the Continental board was Hiram Vandaman Cutler, the international sports-man and polo player. Hiram Vandaman Cutler had another secret name that his wife and social acquaintances had never heard. He was Mr. Saturday in the Emergency Council for Crime Control. The truck was his—but there were no groceries in it.

The chauffeur of the sedan that carried Mr. Tough Tony Farino glanced dutifully in his mirror from time to time; but he saw nothing in the traffic to alarm him. He was unaware of skilful shadowing.

CHAPTER IV THE LAST CARD

HE DROVE, finally, into a dim street that was mostly ware-houses and factories, with here and there a detached and dilapidated dwelling. Halfway down the block he stopped in front of one of the latter, with his engine purring musically.

The ground floor of the dwelling was an ancient bakery shop, boarded up and empty. There was a "To-Let" sign swinging crazily in the cold night wind. Not a peep of light showed anywhere in the building. The windows were all shuttered tight. Alongside the house was a narrow alley with nothing visible except an empty and lopsided ash-can and a gaunt black cat that skittered away with tail erect.

Inside the parked sedan Farino said thickly: "So what?" The bandage was still over his eyes.

"Will you keep that trap of yours shut?" his companion snapped.

A Chevy went zipping past and turned the distant corner. The moment it curved from sight it accelerated and made a loop around the next block. The street lapsed into dim quiet again.

Farino stumbled blindly out of the sedan with a hand on his companion's arm. He growled, "Go easy, mug! I can't see!" The pair disappeared into the alley.

They had hardly vanished when a light delivery truck rolled past the sedan. Tattersall Lacy dropped catlike out the back.

He struck with the quiet speed of a cobra. Before the brain of the startled chauffeur could telegraph a cry to his lips, Lacy had wrenched open the door. The butt of a blue .45 Colt crashed once on the close-cropped skull. The thug collapsed

without a sound.

Lacy caught him savagely, dragged him upright, bent him over the wheel with his limp hands on the spokes. Just a sleepy guy in a parked sedan. Only he didn't snore.

Men were dropping silently from the open back of the truck. Ex-marines, every one. Tough babies in civvies. Veteran leathernecks who had shot the works from Paris Island to Belleau Wood and back again.

One of 'em carried a sledge. In his hands it looked like a tooth-pick. Private George Jackson. Two others gripped

Tommie guns with the drums snapped into place. All of 'em had Colts.

Pat Harrigan was there, his red hair blowing in the wind like a torch. Weaver was there, his nervous little face pinched into cold lines of pleasure.

The Iron Major was the first man through the alley.

There was a tiny paved space in the rear and the blank brick wall of the warehouse that backed it. The forces of Amusement, Incorporated, crouched warily in the shadow. Lacy tiptoed up three wooden steps and turned the knob of the back door warily, carefully, for a full minute. Locked!

He backed away from the barrier and gestured curtly. The marine with the sledge trotted up, planted his feet solidly and struck a thunderous blow. Three impacts took scarcely more than double as many seconds. The third smashed in the door.

The hammer expert swayed aside with a grunt and the marines piled through the opening behind Lacy.

THE two yeggs from the sedan were standing flatfooted. Tough Tony Farino glared at the attackers with red-rimmed murderous eyes. The bandage was gone from his eyes but his brain moved slowly.

His pal with the light eyebrows had a quicker brain. That's why he died first.

As the gun in his wrist jerked upward Tattersall Lacy's bullet drilled the center of his forehead and blew out the back of his head. Farino whirled with a scream and darted like a scurrying rat into another room. The door slammed as a marine dove for it and a key rasped in the lock. The marine jumped sideways as a bullet from the penned killer ripped through the wooden panel.

Lacy nodded and a Tommie gun muzzle

swung in line with the door. The gunner began a brisk rivetting job—top to bottom, left to right. *Papapapapapap!* Splinters flew from the wood.

"Come out fast with your hands up!" Weaver shouted.

There was silence for a moment. Lacy turned away suddenly and tiptoed through the hall. His trained ears had caught the creak of a loose board overhead. He ran to the front of the hall and crouched against the wall, staring up the dusty staircase.

A man was peering intently over the upper bannister rail. A man with no face. A scarlet mask with narrow slits for eyes. As the gun upstairs barked Lacy dropped flat and rolled over and over like a tumblebug out of range. He heard the race of feet overhead and the slam of a door.

Somewhere behind him on the ground floor he could hear Tough Tony's voice crying faintly in abject surrender.

The major shouted in a trumpet-tone: "Sledge! Front and center with the sledge!" and leaped up the rickety stairs three at a time.

The front room on the second floor was locked; he couldn't budge it. Then the sledge-swinger arrived and got to work. He battered the door grimly from its fastening. Ripped it away from bolts and hinges. Lacy straddled the ruin and went in headlong.

The room was empty. The Scarlet Ace was gone.

For a moment the major's jaw sagged in wonder. The room was sealed; there was only the ruined and jagged doorway for exit. How in the name of . . . Suddenly his thin lips smiled.

The man with the sledge said: "What's that, sir?"

It was a faint sound somewhere within the walls of the room. A sound like an enormous mouse scurrying behind lath and plaster. Lacy circled the walls like a terrier sniffing a bone. The north wall echoed hollow. Under the flowered wallpaper the major's knuckles rapped wood.

He said, harshly: "Smash through it, Jackson!"

"Yes, sir."

A dark, narrow recess appeared. A platform inside the wall. Scarcely more than twelve inches wide. Barely wide enough for a man to squeeze into. Lacy squeezed in. Steps led below. It was pitch dark beyond the first two or three. He struck a match awkwardly in the narrow space and peered. The steps looked solid.

"Careful, sir!" Jackson said faintly.

The major said dryly, "Quite so," and descended, his wedged body scraping the smooth sides of the secret staircase. At the bottom his fumbling hands touched a barrier on all sides except the way he had come.

HE struck a fresh match. No sign of a door or a knob. Probably another damned panel with a cunningly hidden spring release.

He shoved futilely with his shoulder. No use. Nor would a sledge be any help at all in such a narrow coffin-like space. There was not room enough to swing it. The slippery Scarlet Ace had effectively vanished like a frightened fox just as the jaws of the hunting-dogs were ready to crunch.

Suddenly Lacy uttered a stifled oath. He heard the faint throb of a motor. He turned awkwardly and squeezed up the narrow tunnel to the opening. Pat Harrigan was in the room above, his big face alight with the lust for more battle.

"Did you get him?" Pat cried.

"Where is he? What happened?"

Lacy pushed past him and ran to the window. He knew with a feeling of baffled despair what had happened. He snapped up the shade and punched open the shutters.

The parked sedan was gone from the curb. The unconscious body of the chauffeur that Lacy had slugged lay huddled in a dark splotch on the sidewalk. The fleeing Scarlet Ace had dragged him from the wheel in one mad heave and pitched him headlong to the sidewalk. He lay there like a sawdust dummy, with his legs bent grotesquely. But the sedan was gone. And with it the Scarlet Ace, the cleverest and deadliest criminal of the organized underworld.

Lacy hurried downstairs and ran into Charlie Weaver in the hall.

"We've got Farino!" the panting Weaver informed him. "He gave up damned quick. Threw his gun away, and came out on his hands and knees like a dog."

"Where is he?"

TOUGH TONY stood on his feet in a corner of the room glaring hideously out of bloodshot eyes. His empty gun lay on the floor. His captors moved aside and Lacy faced the killer from Boston.

"Ten grand, Tony. You didn't earn it, after all. Do I look like the photograph?"

Farino stared somberly at him.

"I'm just a sap. A pushover," Lacy murmured. "Don't you remember? We talked about it. I met you this morning. Chased your girl back to Boston and gave you a cigaret to smoke."

"You?" the killer gagged. "That guy was you?"

"None other, my stupid friend," said the calm, cultured voice. "Take a good look at me. The name is John Tattersall Lacy."

The dull eyes of the killer swam with malignant hate. His whole body seemed to stiffen, to swell in size. Suddenly his hand flashed out of sight for an instant and reappeared. As he leaped steel glittered in his hand.

Lacy dodged the murderous sweep of the knife and closed with the thug. He caught the plunging wrist and bent it backward. They swayed panting together like wrestling bears in a fierce double-hug and no man in the room sought to interfere.

Tony screeched suddenly. A shrill yelp of agony. The knife went sailing end over end and landed with a clink on the floor. The fingers of the major tightened on the killer's throat. They stayed there. After a while Farino fell and Lacy with him; but the viced fingers never relaxed. When they finally uncurled Tough Tony never moved. His face in death wasn't peaceful.

The major arose in the midst of a dead silence and dusted his clothing with a small, finicky gesture. No one said anything.

He turned to Weaver. "How long is it since Jackson smashed in the back door, Captain?"

Weaver looked at his wrist watch. "Four minutes and twenty seconds, sir."

"Hmmm. . . . Brisk work, gentlemen. Where's Cartright?"

"Here, sir."

"Any police interference?"

Cartright's voice sounded bashful and embarrassed. He was a tall six foot kid with a reedy voice. The men in the barracks called him Susan. But only behind his back. The kid could fight with his fists like a longshoreman.

"No, sir," Cartright reported in his high voice. "No police interference. There was one cop, sir. I hit him in the jaw."

"Knocked him out?"

"Yes, sir. I—er—laid him in the alley."

"Hmm.... Regrettable. Quite regrettable." He kept his face and his lips coldly sober. "Captain Weaver, get your men back to the truck at once."

Weaver barked a swift order and the room

emptied.

Lacy tarried a moment. He stared somberly down at the bodies of Farino and the man with the light eyebrows. Two dead snakes, but the major sighed with chagrin as he stood over them.

The king snake had wriggled away. The Scarlet Ace had slipped through the trap.

He eyed Farino without pity. The only good gunman was a dead one. And Tough Tony was pretty dead. There'd be no ten grand in his murderous clutch. No sinister ace of diamonds tucked neatly on Tattersall Lacy's bullet-riddled

body. The Scarlet Ace would have to keep his blood-red calling card for a while.

The major smiled pensively. He prided himself on his politeness, his correctness in social matters. He took a card from his pocket and bent briefly over the body of Mr. Tough Tony Farino. There was no name on the pasteboard but the Scarlet Ace would understand.

A playing card. But not the ace of diamonds. No ace at all.

The joker.