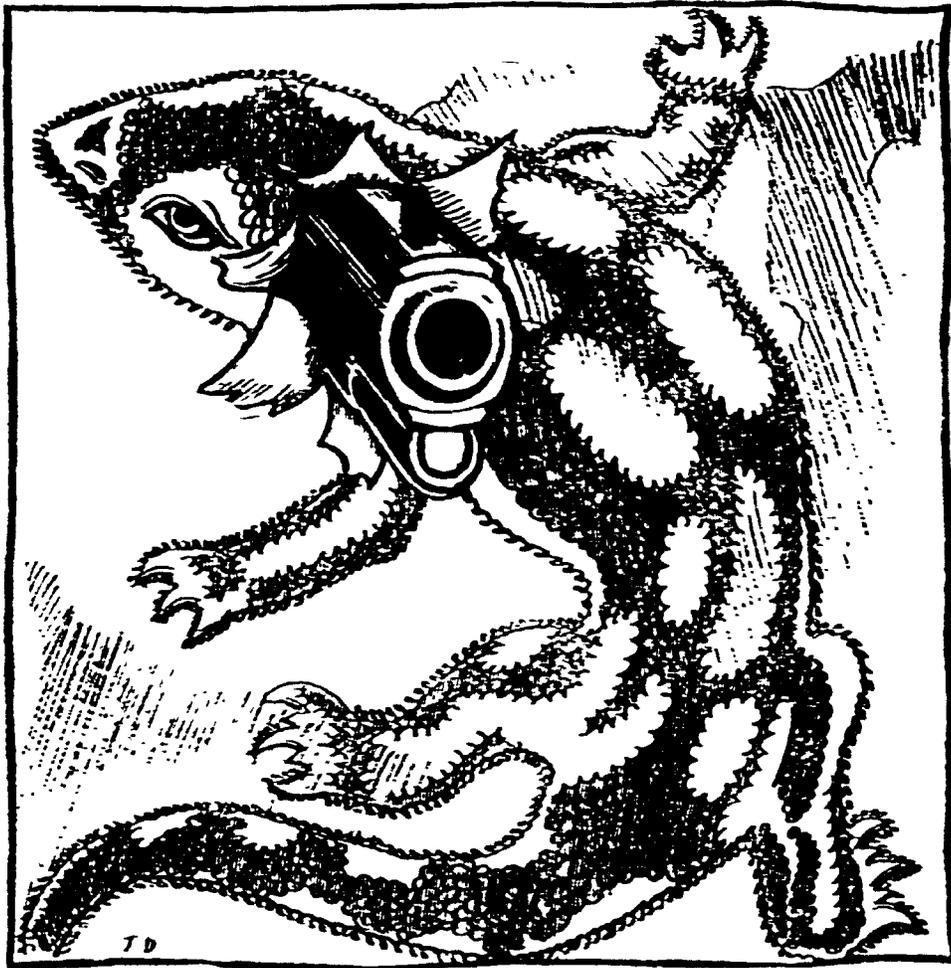


The
SCARLET SALAMANDER



A Complete Novelette

by

OSCAR SCHISGALL

The Scarlet

By Oscar

“So far the band of criminal identified by the Scarlet Salamander has been guilty of twenty-seven major robberies . . . three deaths . . . wholesale terror. . . . Are the police of the City of New York powerless to cope with this amazing situation?”

CHAPTER I

The Salamander's Label

DUTCH DORGAN swung over the side of the fire escape and let his great body drop twelve feet into the courtyard. He fell with a stunning crash that sent him sprawling and exploded the breath in his lungs. But he scrambled to his feet at once, wildly; glared at a window above him, while his trembling hand jerked a revolver from his jacket pocket.

“Come on, you rat!” The challenge burst from him in a fierce whisper, through savagely clenched teeth. “Shove out your dirty head!”

No head appeared, however; and Dorgan, still gripping his automatic, still cursing, turned to dash away across the echoing flagstones.

Brick walls six stories high—higher than the walls of a prison yard—loomed on all sides of him. It was black in this pit; black enough to blind a man. But Dorgan knew exactly where to seek escape. Ahead of him was a tunnel-like passageway. It contained a flight of stone stairs that rose to the street. Toward this he raced.

But he had gone scarcely ten paces when a man leaned out of a window above him. The man extended a long, rigid arm. It pointed a revolver steadily at Dorgan's back. And fired.

From wall to wall the thunder of the shot pounded deafeningly. The fugitive in the courtyard, however, was running too fast to be hit; and before the man at the window could shoot again, Dutch plunged into the safety of the passageway.



*“Damn you!” Dorgan rasped, his eyes as fiery as a cat’s.
“You asked for it!”
His gun leaped up toward the second policeman. . .*

Salamander

Schisgall

Gasping for breath, he bounded on toward the stairs and reached them so precipitately that he actually sprang up two steps before he could stop.

And then, for a second, he stood dumbstruck, his eyes overwhelmed with surprise—and terror.

Two bulky figures were at the top of the stairs. They were already starting down. The yellow light of a lamppost hung behind them, starkly accentuating their silhouettes. And Dorgan saw that they were policemen. . . .

He had no time to hesitate. His lips curled back over long, ugly teeth. His eyes narrowed and blazed. Trapped. . . . And being trapped, he yielded to all the rage that was storming within him.

Twice his automatic cracked, quickly, at his hip.

As the sounds beat through the passageway, the nearest policeman suddenly paused. Something metallic clanked at his feet, and he sagged against the wall, a monstrous blur in the darkness. His knees crumpled under him weakly. He turned a little, and then abruptly pitched downward to land with a dreadful thud at the bottom of the stairs.

“Damn you!” Dorgan rasped, his eyes as fiery as a cat’s. “You asked for it!”

His gun leaped up toward the second policeman.

“You too, you—!”

That was all he could say. There were other shots in the passageway. Shots cracking from the weapon of the man on the stairs. Two of them—and a third—

With thunder in his ears, Dorgan felt two dull blows on his chest. They startled rather than pained him. He opened his mouth and his eyes in a kind of ludicrous amazement, as if he refused to believe he had been hit. Somehow the fingers that held his automatic had involuntarily been lowered; they seemed to be losing their strength.... He snarled a



disgusted “A-a-ah!” and staggered and pushed out a hand to seek the support of the wall. Again he raised his revolver.

The policeman’s third bullet crashed into the center of Dorgan’s forehead and killed him on his feet.



HE was a young man, Officer Furney, with less than two months’ service to his credit. This sort of thing was new to him. When he came down the stairs, he was white. His jaws quivered, and he swallowed with a great gulp.

The two bodies formed a black, shapeless heap. In order to raise the fallen policeman’s shoulders, Furney had first to push Dorgan’s bulk aside. It rolled grotesquely, an open palm striking the flagstones with a strangely lifelike thwack. Despite himself, young Furney shuddered slightly. And very gently he lifted his companion’s head to his knee; a limp, swinging head, its eyes closed. In its throat was a hideous wound that forced Officer Furney to grit his teeth.

He whispered: “Callahan!”

He waited, knowing very well that Callahan was dead. His own countenance was more pallid than the one at his knee. After a moment he shook the man’s shoulders, threw off his cap, and whispered again: “*Callahan!*”

In the courtyard, meanwhile, a veritable bedlam had risen. Scores of windows were open, and agitated voices were shouting wild questions.

Furney lowered Callahan’s body to the ground, stepped across it and across the huddle that had been Dutch Dorgan. There was, in his movements, something uncannily deliberate. As he walked, he replaced his revolver in its holster. He went into the courtyard and stared upward, his nostrils dilating and narrowing tightly.

Gargoyles. A hundred gargoyles leering down at him from window ledges. Babbling, shouting, gesticulating. Softly Officer Furney cursed. Then, in a hoarse, rasping voice, he called:

“Shut up! All of you—shut up!”

Curiously, his words did evoke a sudden tense silence. People gaped down at him in wonder; and he glared back at them, half in defiance, half in contempt.

Presently, his face still colorless, he turned again to the passageway. From his pocket he drew

a small electric flashlight and sent its thin golden beam darting ahead to the two bodies.

But that beam revealed something else—a man who was breathlessly stumbling down the steps, his eyes burning as the ray of light struck them. He was small and fragile, with a dressing gown flapping voluminously about his little figure. What Furney noticed almost at once was the empty sleeve of his right arm.

The policeman paused, his narrowed eyes challenging. Beyond the bodies the one-armed man halted, trembling visibly.

“Well?” Furney snapped.

The man pointed his left hand downward. It was shaking uncontrollably.

“D-dead?” he gasped.

Furney nodded stiffly. He was trying hard to rid his throat of its stifling constriction.

“He was robbing my apartment!” the little man whispered in awed excitement. “When he heard me get up, he went through the window and—”

“Save it,” Furney ordered huskily.

“He tried to—”

“Save it, I said!” The policeman’s voice was suddenly harsh and bitter. His eyes flamed. After a moment he looked down at the human wreckage about him; and he rapped out: “You got a phone?”

“Ye-es,”—hushedly.

“Then get upstairs and ring the House! Tell ‘em Officer Steve Callahan has been—”

Furney stopped, his very breath checked. He stared down with slowly widening eyes, as though he were gaping at something incredible.

The beam of his flashlight was focussed on a few things that had slipped out of Dutch Dorgan’s inner pocket. They lay close to the dead gangster’s neck; a wallet, a pencil, two small, square slips of paper.

It was the papers that held Furney’s dumbfounded attention.

His light revealed upon each a peculiar imprint: the picture of an ugly, crawling, reptilian thing—a picture stamped in red ink. His eyes became circles of amazement; and presently he muttered, “Holy heaven!”

He stared at the body of Dutch Dorgan in renewed wonder. And as he stared, he picked up the papers. They were labels, with adhesive on their reverse sides.

"What—what is it?" the one-armed man whispered.

Furney did not at once reply. He stood silent, examining those odd labels, fixing his light on the strange prints they bore. When he looked again at the little man, queer flames were leaping in the policeman's eyes.

"It's the Scarlet Salamander!" he said huskily. "This guy must have been—one of them!"

CHAPTER II

Chicago Al Veritt



HE poker game at Chicago Al Veritt's apartment in West 54th Street was far from exciting. A few of the five players were already glancing restlessly at the clock; it was after two in the morning.

"These 'sociable' games give me a pain," yawned Fat Felix Meller through his pudgy hand. "A feller might as well be asleep.... Raise you ten, Al. I've got the goods."

"Ten's right. And here's ten more." Chicago Al Veritt, smiling, leaned forward to place a twenty-dollar bill in the center of the table. "As for the size of this game—well, Felix, I'll play you for any stakes you like whenever you show the cash. Credit's out."

"S'matter?" Meller chuckled amiably. "Don't trust me?"

"Sure I do. Asking cash is just one of my nasty little habits.... You calling? Right. I'm spreading a small straight, up to the eight."

He was handsome, young Chicago Al Veritt, and brisk in manner. One would have guessed that he had at some time played football, for his beautifully proportioned figure was rugged and lithe and hard. His jaw was square, containing an almost imperceptible cleft; and his narrow gray eyes were luminous with a hint of vitality which his companions utterly lacked. Those who sat at his table and drank his Scotch knew very little about him, save that he came from Chicago and that some difficulty with the local authorities had caused him to leave the Windy City in extreme haste. This knowledge, however, troubled none of them. They accepted the blond young Viking for his ready smile, his ready hospitality, and his

ready money.

The only one among them who regarded Chicago Al with keener, more suspicious interest—as one might study a brilliant gem whose genuineness was uncertain—was the fat Felix Meller.

But then, Felix peered at the whole world with distrust in those piggish little eyes of his. He was a great blob of flabby flesh, soft and rounded and yielding wherever one poked him. He had full red lips—a woman's lips—in a yellowish face that quivered gelatinously whenever he stirred it. A tremendous face with loosely dangling jowls.

His three kings losing to Chicago Al's straight, Felix started placidly to deal another hand—when a ring at the doorbell abruptly halted his fingers.

All five men at the table stiffened. Four of them peered first at the door, then at Chicago Al. And their eyes were uneasy. But the blond young giant relaxed his tension immediately. Still smiling, he pushed back his chair.

"Keep on dealing, Felix," he directed.

Meller frowned. "Expecting anybody?"

"No—except the milkman."

Chicago Al, hitching his suspenders higher on his shoulders, moved out to his small entrance hall. He opened the door to a lean, short man with a distinct case of spinal curvature.

"Oh, hello, Louie," he said, with a sudden grin. "Come in."

Louie Rigotti wore a black felt hat tugged low over his right eyebrow. His mouth was a sullen gash that twisted upward at one corner, as though he were constantly snarling. From that distorted corner to his ear ran a bluish, zigzag scar.

He ignored the greeting and peered intently at Chicago Al Veritt's lips.

"Fat Meller here?" he whispered.

"Sure! Come in."

"Anybody else here?"

"Just a few of the good lads."

As Louie Rigotti moved into the apartment, both his hands in his jacket pockets, Chicago Al quietly closed the door. His pleasant face still held its smile, but deep in his eyes lurked a troubled question.

Louie paused in the door of the living room. He nodded to the men at the table. Then he

fastened his gaze on Felix Meller's sensuous mouth. And very softly he reported:

"They took Dutch Dorgan!"

Meller did not stir. But the yellowness of his cheeks became strangely pasty, and he allowed his five cards to fall, faces upturned, to the table.

After a moment, during which he licked those small lips, he drew a quick, audible breath.

"What," he snapped, "are you batting about?"

"I said they took Dutch Dorgan—the cops. They loaded him full of lead while he tried to make a getaway."

"From where?"

"Some job he was pulling uptown."

Felix Meller's fingers encircled the arms of his chair. They squeezed until his knuckles were white. In no other way, however, did he move, and his small, porcine eyes remained fixed on Louie Rigotti.

"Dutch told me this afternoon," he muttered thickly, "that he was taking Gussie out tonight!"

"Dutch," Rigotti answered dryly, "was always a damned liar."

"Where—where did he try this job?"

Now Louie paused, somewhat cautiously, before replying. His scarred lips twitched, and his keen survey passed searchingly from one bewildered face at the table to another, until it halted on Chicago Al Veritt. Al, lighting a cigarette, was peering at Louie interestedly through the smoke.

After an instant, Rigotti returned his attention to Felix Meller's chin.

"Dutch," he said slowly, "tried to stick up the apartment of a guy named Stegg."

"Stegg?"

"Yeah. Some antique dealer on 95th Street. Then he tried to shoot it out with the cops. Killed one of 'em, too. But he kissed the pavement right after that."

Louie finally walked into the room, frowning. He sat beside the small serving table on which stood two bottles and several glasses. With his left hand he thrust his hat back from his forehead, while his right hand reached for one of the bottles.

"When," Felix Meller asked, rather unsteadily, "did this happen?"

"An hour ago."

Carefully Louie poured himself a drink,

gulped it down; then once more peered at the fat man's pendulous mouth.

"Wait'll you hear," he warned, "the ear-splittin' row the newspapers raise over this!"

"Why?" Meller derisively snorted. "Why should they? Dorgan was nothing but a bum!"

"Yeah? Well, he was worse than a bum tonight. He was brainless.... They found two Salamander labels on him!"

The effect of that announcement was remarkable. To Felix Meller it came as a shocking blow. He sank back in his chair, quite aghast, his whole flabby body becoming limp. The other players stiffened in renewed excitement. As for Chicago Al Veritt, he merely scowled at the tip of his cigarette and thoughtfully muttered:

"So Dutch Dorgan was one of the Scarlet Salamanders, was he?"

Louie shrugged. "What's it look like to you?"

"It looks to me as if I've been giving that crowd a lot of credit it doesn't deserve," said Chicago Al, with a grim chuckle. "I thought it was an outfit that was very particular about its membership list."

No one answered.

Again Al chuckled, dryly now. He looked across the table at the round face of Felix Meller.

"Just what," he asked quietly, "is this Scarlet Salamander?"

Meller wriggled up in his chair and grunted. He extended his arm to gather the cards. "Don't ask me, Al," he said.

"But Dorgan was your friend."

"Was he? That's the first I hear of it.... Give me those cards. I'll deal over."

And now Chicago Al tilted back his sun-tanned young face and laughed. He laughed merrily and without censure.

"Felix," he declared, "your poker face isn't worth a nickel when you're not playing poker!"

Meller flushed and snapped, "What d'you mean by that?"

"I mean a blind man could see the Scarlet Salamander crawling behind your eyes. What are you scared about? You're among friends."

"You're crazy," Meller muttered, frowning down at the cards he shuffled. "I don't know any more about the Salamander than you do."

"That so?... All I know, brother, is that the

cops have pinned twenty-seven robberies on that crowd. And personally I think it's a fool's trick to stick a label on every job. I don't see any reason for it."

Upon this Felix Meller offered no comment. He dealt the cards swiftly, expertly, and picked up his hand as though there had been no interruption in the game. For a few seconds Chicago Al regarded him in amusement. Then, crushing his cigarette in a tray, he shrugged and inspected his own cards.

"O.K. with me," he agreed. "We won't discuss it."

Louie Rigotti, having drained the last of the Scotch, sent the empty bottle sliding across the floor toward the kitchen door.

"Got any more of this stuff, Al?" he asked.

"Sure. You'll find a couple of bottles in the bedroom closet. Just help yourself."

Louie rose and put his hands into his jacket pockets. With his hat still on his head, he went into the bedroom, found the closet, and pulled open its door. A few bottles were aligned on a shelf, and Rigotti took down two of them.

It was when he began to move away that his glance struck the suitcase on the floor. Chicago Al Veritt's suitcase, of course.

One of its sides having fallen against the wall, it was sufficiently open for Louie to see its contents.

And seeing them, he stood rigid, momentarily paralyzed. His grip on the bottles tightened dangerously, and he crushed back his breath. Once he shot a quick, wild look toward the living room. A look that was frightened and amazed. Those at the poker table could not see him here, and so he dropped to his knees. Noiselessly he set the bottles down on the carpet; and his hands shook as he picked up the thing in the suitcase.

It was a small, compact bundle of little papers, bound together by an elastic band. Labels...their reverse sides sticky with adhesive....

Perhaps a hundred of them there. Louie's eyes bulged in stupefaction as he discovered that each paper was stamped with the figure of a Scarlet Salamander!

As he knelt there, trembling wildly, he heard Chicago Al's cheerful voice inquire:

"Find it all right, Louie?"

Rigotti turned his mouth to throw quick words over his shoulder. "Yeah, I found it!"

He dropped the labels into the suitcase as though they had scorched his fingertips. For they had told him something the police of New York would have given a great deal to learn!... When he returned to the living room, his lean face was oddly flushed, and the scar on his left cheek was blazing.

"I've often wondered," Chicago Al Veritt was casually saying as he flipped cards around the table, "just who the man behind this Salamander outfit may be. Felix, you oughtn't to hold out on old friends."

"I told you I don't know!" Meller snapped irritably. "For the love of Mike, shut up and deal!"

Chicago Al's merry, taunting glance slanted inquisitively to Louie Rigotti. The cards were still flying around the table, his long fingers flipping them with a peculiar suggestion of negligence.

"How about you, Louie?" he gently chided. "You holding back on us, too?"

"Me?" Rigotti drew back his lips in a wolfish grin. "Nah," he said, "I don't know who's behind the Scarlet Salamander. How should I?... Maybe that's something *nobody* is supposed to know, eh, Al?"

He set the bottles down and laughed—a queer, cackling laugh deep in his throat. And then he looked obliquely at Chicago Al Veritt's lips.

CHAPTER III

Chicago Al's Game



IN the morning Al Veritt read a complete account of Dutch Dorgan's death; read it while a taxicab carried him to—Police Headquarters.

The story occupied a conspicuous place on the front page of every newspaper; not because of the gangster's personal importance, but rather, as Louie Rigotti had predicted, because of the significant labels that had been found in the dead man's pocket. When he had finished the report, Veritt grunted, narrowed his eyes, and turned to the editorial page.

Quite the first thing he saw was a cartoon that hardened his gaze and deepened the lines in his young countenance.

It depicted Charles Thompson Corbin, the Commissioner of Police, fleeing in terror, his arms outstretched, before a huge, grotesque monstrosity that resembled a snorting dragon. That pursuing monstrosity, however, was not a dragon; it was a gigantic salamander. ... And the

caption of the sarcastic drawing was:

Help! Help! Somebody page St. George!

A short, harsh sound crackled from Chicago

Louie's eyes bulged in stupefaction as he discovered that each paper was stamped with the figure of a Scarlet Salamander.... He shot a quick wild look toward the living room....



Al's throat, and he contracted his brows in a scowl. Almost balefully he drew his stare from the cartoon to send it skimming over the editorials until, under the title line, "AGAIN THE SALAMANDER," he found:

It is certainly high time the Commissioner of Police produced something more tangible than promises and theories in the case of the Scarlet Salamander. This paper does not by any means recommend hasty and ill-advised action on the part of the authorities, but it does believe that the people of New York are rapidly losing patience with the apparent ineffectuality of police efforts.

So far the band of criminals identified by the Scarlet Salamander has been guilty of twenty-seven major robberies within the city limits. Its activities have resulted in three deaths: that of Anthony Scarzo, a burglar, five weeks ago; and those of Hans "Dutch" Dorgan and Officer Stephen Callahan at one o'clock this morning.

The attempted burglary of Horatio Stegg's apartment last night would have been the twenty-eighth on the Salamander's list. That it was frustrated at all can be credited only to the fortuitous accident of Mr. Stegg's awakening in time to drive the burglar off. But this accident loses all its happier aspects when one remembers that it cost the life of a policeman.

How much longer will these depredations be allowed to continue? Are the police really powerless to deal with so brazen a gang?

Chicago Al Veritt threw the newspaper to the seat beside him. He was frowning in a mixture of anger and disgust. After a time he lit a cigarette, slumped low, and glowered at the back of the chauffeur's head.

When he reached Police Headquarters, he walked into its corridor with a brisk, aggressive stride, and his jaw was rock-hard. He turned corners and ran up stairs with a certainty that denoted a surprising familiarity with the building. And he went directly to the office of Charles Thompson Corbin, Commissioner of Police.

In its outer chamber a uniformed man rose from a desk to greet him with a quick smile.

"Good morning, Mr. Corbin!"

"Morning," snapped Chicago Al. "My father in?"

"Yes, sir. But he's got somebody in his office right now. Want me to tell him you're here?"

"Please."

While the attendant hurried away, Chicago

Al moved restlessly about the room. He was still frowning; and whenever he remembered the sardonic cartoon in the paper, he muttered to himself. From his appearance this day one would scarcely have suspected that he had played poker until well after four o'clock in the morning. His gray suit was impeccably pressed, with a wisp of silk handkerchief fluttering from its breast pocket. His attractive young face was clean-shaven and sun-bronzed and alert, the eyes brilliant.

In a moment the uniformed man returned to report: "All right, sir. He said to go right in."

And so Chicago Al Veritt went into the office of the Commissioner of Police. He found his father—a sturdily molded man with a fine mass of unruly white hair—at his desk. The elder Corbin was grim this morning, and tight-lipped. He sat in conference with a small, one-armed man; a man who seemed frightened and distressed, and whose single hand constantly rubbed his bony knee.

"Hello, George." As he spoke, the commissioner nodded briefly, without smiling. "Step in and shut the door." He waited in silence until the young man had approached the desk. Then he indicated his visitor. "I want you to meet Mr. Horatio Stegg, whose apartment the Salamander tried to rob last night...Mr. Stegg, my son."

Young George Corbin—alias "Chicago Al Veritt"—pressed the left hand which Mr. Stegg extended; and at the same time a glimpse of his habitual smile recurred.

"I've been reading a great deal about you this morning, Mr. Stegg," he said.

The little man managed a dry grin. He plucked uneasily at his trousers.

"Ye-es," he answered in flat, metallic voice that issued through his nose. "I—I daresay you have. But it isn't the kind of publicity I like. It was a—a dreadful affair!"

Uncomfortably he glanced across the desk at the commissioner who, understanding some unspoken query, nodded reassuringly.

"Go right on with the story, Mr. Stegg. George will wish to hear it himself."

A swift, significant look at his father; then George Corbin went to sit beside the window, where a deluge of sunshine poured over his blond hair, filling it with gold. He leaned forward

slightly, listening intently, while Horatio Stegg resumed the account which had been interrupted:

"Well, as I was telling you, sir—" in that sharp, nasal voice—"I awoke when I heard somebody moving about in the library. And I was pretty badly frightened. But there was a revolver in my bureau, and I crept out of bed and got it. That made me feel a little better. I held it in front of me and started down the hall.

"The fellow must have heard me coming, though I walked on my toes, because by the time I reached the library door, he was gone. I just had a glimpse of him as he swung over the fire escape railing. Well—" Mr. Stegg paused nervously, frowned, and plucked at his trousers. "Maybe I should have gone right after him. But, as I told you before, I had some pretty valuable stuff in my safe. And my first concern was for that. So I ran across the room to the safe.

"But it was still closed. I guess he hadn't had the time to open it before I—drove him off. And so I rushed to the window. He was just running across the courtyard. I don't know what made me shoot, really—a—a sort of wild impulse. I was excited. Anyhow, I did shoot, though I missed him badly. And that shot most have been heard by the cops—eh—the policemen."

Mr. Corbin nodded gravely.

"Yes. It was merest chance, Mr. Stegg, that the policemen were in front of the house at that particular moment. They had just paused to exchange a word when they heard the shot."

"Yes, sir. Then they rushed into the courtyard and—and—well, I guess that's all."

There was a momentary silence. Young George Corbin was thoughtfully eyeing his cigarette case. Mr. Stegg was rubbing his knee. And the commissioner had picked up a pencil at which he stared fixedly.

"You say," he murmured presently, without looking up, "that you had something valuable in your safe?"

"Yes, sir," asserted Stegg, with some vehemence. "An Italian Renaissance necklace of heavy gold links in which are set thirty-seven precious stones. I acquired it only yesterday. Its intrinsic value alone is almost ten thousand dollars. As to its historical value—"

"Pardon me," the commissioner interrupted. "Who knew you had the necklace in your safe last

night?"

Mr. Stegg paused and arched his brows. He gazed at the inkwell on the commissioner's desk.

"Why," he muttered after a time, "I—I don't think *anyone* knew it, besides myself."

The commissioner put down the pencil and leaned back in his chair. He shook his head slowly.

"It's hard to think," he said, "that the Salamander would merely *chance* upon that necklace. Hitherto that crowd has always planned its coups carefully, with a definite objective in mind... Come, Mr. Stegg, consider: Wasn't *anyone* in a position to know the necklace was in your safe?"

But Mr. Stegg staunchly maintained his assurance.

"No sir," he declared positively.

"The person from whom you acquired it, for instance?"

"I got it from the Customs House," the one-armed man explained. "That necklace was purchased from Soratti and Giordino in Florence. They shipped it to me, and yesterday the Customs officials notified me that it had arrived. I went to the Customs House in the afternoon, secured it, and took it straight home to my safe. I told nobody about it. Nor have I a servant at home who might have spoken of it. There's a visiting maid who comes to do my apartment while I'm out. So, as I say, nobody could have known—unless somebody followed me home from the Customs House!"

The commissioner said nothing. He peered across the room at his son, but George's blond head was lowered; he was slowly tapping a cigarette on his silver case. Indeed, he had been tapping it for the past few minutes.

After a moment, Mr. Corbin looked back at his visitor.

"Do you import things of that sort frequently, Mr. Stegg?" he inquired. "Frequently enough, let us say, to have someone guess the significance of your going to the Customs House?"

The little man shrugged.

"I don't know just how to answer that, sir. I deal in antiques—mostly tapestries and paintings. But occasionally, if I learn of something interesting in jewelry, I try that, too. But I don't think I've imported more than four or five items

of jewelry in the past four years."

"You've been in the business just four years, you mean?"

"In New York, yes. Previously I had my office in Montreal."

"I see."

Commissioner Corbin once more frowned at the pencil. And now there followed a silence so long, so awkward, that Horatio Stegg began to stir in his seat and to glance questioningly from father to son.

Then, quite abruptly and determinedly, Charles Thompson Corbin rose. He forced a grim smile to his lips.

"Well, Mr. Stegg, I don't think there's anything else you can do for us now." He spoke with brisk finality and offered his hand across the desk. "Thank you very much for coming."

In obvious relief the one-armed man pushed himself to his feet. He drew a long breath and reached for his hat. It was just as he touched it that George Corbin, in his chair at the sun-filled window, raised his head to make an inquiry which seemed oddly casual:

"By the way, Mr. Stegg—was that necklace insured against theft?"

Stegg turned, in some bewilderment.

"Why, no," he said. "I intended to have it insured today. In fact, I will."

"But certainly a thing so valuable didn't come to you from Italy without insurance?"

"Oh, no, of course not." Mr. Stegg wagged his thin head emphatically. "It carried insurance in transit. Naturally. But that expired when I took it out of the Customs House."

"I see." George Corbin lifted the cigarette toward his lips, half way. His hand paused. And suddenly he smiled, quite affably, and nodded. "Thanks. I just wanted to know...."



WHEN the one-armed man departed, George Corbin's smile went with him. He remained grave, staring at his father and throwing aside the unlit cigarette.

The commissioner muttered something and dropped stiffly into his chair. He sent a hand coursing through his mass of white hair; and then, from under lowered brows, darted an oblique, piercing glance at George.

"What was the idea," he demanded, somewhat irritably, "of questioning him about the insurance? Did you think he'd hired Dorgan to steal the necklace?"

"Not exactly. It just occurred to me that if he'd had the thing insured, his insurance agent might have known of its presence in the safe.... But what's the difference?" George shrugged. "Both theories are out."

Commissioner Corbin leaned back and crossed his legs. He frowned gloomily through the window, as if he saw rain instead of sunshine. A full minute passed before he grunted:

"Confound those newspapers!"

George raised his brows cryptically, looked down at his nails, then back at his father.

"How's Inspector Kern coming along on the case, Dad?"

"Like a committee," said Corbin in disgust. "All he reports is progress.... Hang it, George, this Salamander is making fools of us all! We're no nearer the man behind it than we were months ago. That's not for publication; it's just the truth."

The young man pushed his hands deep into his trouser pockets. He hunched comfortably in his chair.

"As a matter of fact. Dad," he said, "I think you're wrong there."

"Wrong? How?"

I've got an idea that I'm stepping pretty close to the Scarlet Salamander's tail myself. If all goes well, I ought to be sprinkling salt on it very, very soon."

Commissioner Corbin sat quite still, peering at his son intently. He seemed irresolute; undecided as to how seriously to accept George's words. Finally, however, he moved forward to rest his arms on the desk. He clasped his fingers in a Gothic arch and fastened a level gaze on the young man.

"Just what," he asked softly, "do you mean?"

George explained: "Among the many bosom friends I have made during the past few weeks there are two chaps in particular who appear to have some knowledge about the Scarlet Salamander. At any rate, they know a great deal concerning Dutch Dorgan. I'm doing my best with them."

"Who are they?"—quickly.

"A porpoise named Felix Meller and a little

weasel called Louie Rigotti. Chums of mine.” George grinned.

Abruptly the commissioner rose. His narrow eyes flashed.

“Meller and Rigotti!” he whispered. “Good for you, George! That’s splendid! I’ll get Inspector Kern to watch them—or to bring them in!”

But George sat up in immediate protest and consternation.

“No, Dad, no, no! Nothing like that, please!”

“Why not?”

“Those boys carry spare eyes in the backs of their collars. They’d know in a minute if they were being shadowed; and that, in warning them, would ruin my game at the outset. Keep Inspector Kern away. I’ve got to handle this myself—by my own methods.”

“That’s absurd!”

“Certainly. But it’s producing results.”

For a moment Commissioner Corbin stood hesitant, frowning into his son’s brilliant eyes. Then he moved around the desk, slowly, and came to stand in front of the young man. He drew in his lips grimly.

“Come clean, George!” he ordered.

“About what?”

“Just what have you been up to in that apartment of yours?”

The stern query brought a smile back to George’s countenance. He relaxed and once more shrugged, while his fingers jingled silver in his pockets.

“No more than I told you a couple of weeks ago, Dad,” he said. “I’ve simply been going after the Scarlet Salamander in my own way.”

“What way?”

“Well—I’ll try to make it clear.” George spoke earnestly now, and rapidly. “Five weeks ago, you remember, the first member of the Salamander gang was killed—in about the same way that Dorgan got his last night. That member was Anthony Scarzo. I decided that Scarzo’s friends might know something about his connection with the organization. And that it would pay to investigate among them.”

“Inspector Kern,” interrupted Corbin gravely, “did the same thing,”

“Not quite, Dad. He simply hauled Scarzo’s friends to Headquarters and grilled them. He

might as well have grilled a plateful of clams. They’d never speak to the police, those happy lads. Never. I tried a different system. First I rented that little apartment under the name of Chicago Al Veritt. Then I learned where Scarzo’s friends usually congregate, and started frequenting those dives—also as Chicago Al Veritt. I became a good spender, a hale-fellow-well-met—all that sort of thing. Sunny boy Veritt, the workingman’s pal. Well, pretty soon I started giving little parties at my apartment, and the boys came around. Dorgan himself came once or twice, he being a member of the crowd. And I’ve been doing my best to pump them in a neat, inconspicuous way.... That’s about all.”

The commissioner thrust his hands into his back trouser pockets. He looked at once startled and worried.

“Don’t any of them suspect you’re—my son?” he whispered.

“I hope not!”

“What if they did?”

“Well, now,” George advised, “let’s not have black thoughts. There’s too much to do.... You see, Dad, I’ve got one advantage over the police. The bad boys I’m playing with know practically every important detective in New York. Certainly they know Inspector Kern. But the fact that I’ve spent the last four years at the University of Chicago makes me a stranger among them. And that’s mighty important!”

Corbin drew a heavy breath. His face hardened.

“George,” he said, “playing a lone hand is dangerous. You’re an old football star. You ought to know that the only way to win is by teamwork.”

“Oh, but I’ve boxed occasionally, too,” the young man replied. “The only way to win a fist fight is by working alone. If I consulted others before every punch, I’d do my swinging from the canvas.... No, Dad. I’m doing my level best to help you out of this Salamander mess. But if you want results, you’ve got to let me use my own system.”

For a while the elder Corbin stood still, thinking, staring at his son without actually seeing him. And finally, in a queer, searching tone, he asked:

“Tell me, George, where—where are you

getting the *money* for all this?"

"The money? We-ell—" The young man crossed his legs and grinned amiably. "Poker is a great game, Dad. Especially after you've taken a four-year course in it at college."

"You mean you're winning enough at cards?" the commissioner almost gasped.

"Well, my friends seem to be very enthusiastic about the game. And I've had amazing luck—really, Dad, stupefying luck. And after all, isn't it fair that my new pals pay for this investigation, since it's all devoted to them?"

The commissioner's teeth emitted a peculiar, grinding sound. A few seconds he hesitated; then he went back to his desk. When he had sat down, he murmured:

"And you—you actually want to go on with this sort of thing, George?"

"Yes!" said young Corbin. "Until some cartoon shows you jabbing a sword into a salamander's gizzard!"

CHAPTER IV

Louie Rigotti Talks



IT was two o'clock in the afternoon when George Corbin returned to his apartment on west 54th Street. He exchanged a merry word with the hall-boy, went to the fourth floor in the lift, and was unlocking his door when a low voice behind him said:

"Hello, Al."

Despite himself, he started as he looked around. On the stairs, where he had apparently been waiting, stood Louie Rigotti. He seemed more round-shouldered than ever before. His hat was tugged low over his right eyebrow. His hands were hidden in his jacket pockets. And his sullen, distorted mouth, screwed up by that scar on his cheek, was twisted in an ugly grin.

Though George's muscles grew suddenly taut, he laughed. "Hello, Louie," he greeted pleasantly. "My God, you look like a dose of poison! What's the matter?"

"I've been waiting for you," said Louie, without stirring.

"What's up?"

Louie was staring straight at George's lips.

He said: "I gotta talk to you, Al. Better get inside."

Something ominous in Rigotti's words. Something vaguely threatening and hostile and cold. Deep in George Corbin's eyes, while he led his guest into the living room, lurked troubled shadows. He frowned, and his eyes were suddenly small, suspicious, wary. But these symptoms of anxiety vanished as soon as he threw his hat aside. It was as if he were casting away a mask. When he sat on a corner of the table, with one dangling leg idly swinging, he smiled very amicably.

"Well, old-timer, what can I do for you?"

Louie did not sit down. Nor did he remove his low-tilted hat. Nor did he take his hands from his pockets. With legs parted a little, in the pose of a miniature Colossus, he stood motionless, staring at George's chin with smouldering eyes.

"I ain't going to beat around the bush, Al," he promised softly.

"What bush?"

"I'm here to talk about them labels."

At that George's foot ceased swinging. His smile died.

"Labels?" he repeated slowly, after a pause.

"You heard me, Al."

Heavily, hesitantly, young Corbin rose from his seat on the table. A deep, vertical cleft appeared between his brows, and in his eyes leaped new glints—dangerous glints.

"I don't know," he said quietly, "what you're talking about, Louie."

"Aw, quit stalling!"—with a sneer. "I mean the Salamander labels in your suitcase. I spotted 'em last night."

And now George Corbin's countenance paled. His whole body stiffened and hardened, and his nostrils quivered like those of a nervous horse.

"So that's it, eh?" he whispered in harsh, suppressed anger. "What about 'em, Louie?"

"I'm ready to talk business."

"I don't get you. If you've got anything to say, spill it, and spill it quick!"

"Oh, yeah?" Louie's gaze rose indolently from George's chin to his mouth, where it affixed itself firmly. Otherwise he did not move, save that his lips had become mocking and contemptuous. "O. K.," he agreed. "I'll talk turkey.... Al, *you're the guy who's been spreading the salamander*

labels!”

“That,” George said hoarsely, “is a damned lie!”

Impetuously he stepped forward. His eyes were burning, and his fists were clenched. It seemed as if he would crash a blow into his visitors crooked mouth. But he had scarcely thrust his foot forward when he halted.

For at last Louie Rigotti had drawn a hand from his pocket. It was the right hand, and it remained close to his hip. But it leveled a squat automatic at George Corbin’s heart.

Slowly Louie grinned, his twisting lips revealing yellowed teeth.

“Don’t be a fool, Al,” he advised, staring now at George’s necktie. “Nobody seen me come up here. I got in while the hallboy took the elevator up. I’m playing safe all around. Not that I want to plug you. But if you get foolish, I’ll have to.”

George looked at the revolver; looked at Louie Rigotti’s scarred, uncompromising face. Then, in grim silence, he drew back to the table. His hands grasped its edge behind him, and the posture threw his head and shoulders forward belligerently.

“All right,” he said softly. “What do you want?”

“I want five grand, Al.”

“What for?”

“To keep what I know to myself.”

George Corbin wet his lips. “You dirty little blackmailer!” he whispered, the words bursting through his teeth.

“Easy,” Rigotti advised. “Maybe I’ll get insulted.”

“If you think I’m the Scarlet Salamander,” George snapped, “you’re crazy!”

“Who said you’re the Salamander? I know damn well you’re not.”

“Then what do you mean—”

“Listen,” Louie interrupted. “I said you’re the guy who’s spreading them labels. That’s what I said and that’s what I mean. Do I have to make it clearer?”

“Lots!”

“O. K.”

Louie Rigotti waited an instant, as if gathering his thoughts into coherent sequence. He stared straight at George Corbin’s mouth. His revolver pointed straight at George Corbin’s heart.

And presently he said:

“The cops think the Scarlet Salamander has pulled twenty-seven robberies in New York. They figure twenty-seven because in twenty-seven cases those labels have been left stuck to some piece of furniture. But the cops are wrong. All wrong. The Scarlet Salamander has pulled only nineteen jobs in New York. The other eight were the work of *somebody else!*”

“You seem to know plenty of details,” muttered young Corbin.

“You bet. Enough to put a guy named Chicago Al Veritt in a very tough spot!”

“Go on. What’s the rest of it?”

Louie’s mouth twitched a little. He sniffed. Then he went on:

“I know that the Scarlet Salamander ain’t pulled more than two jobs last month. And yet, during that time, the cops have reported *ten* Salamander jobs.... That means, Al, that somebody else has been working hard and leaving Salamander labels around to send the cops up the wrong street! And *you’re* that somebody else.”

George scoffed. “You’re crazy, Louie.”

“Yeah? Then what about that package of labels in your suitcase?”

For a while young Corbin offered no reply. He stood still, thinking swiftly, his eyes afire. When he did speak, it was not to answer the challenge. Instead, in a low, tense voice, he demanded:

“Well, what are you going to do about it, Louie?”

“That depends,” said Rigotti. “I told you I want five grand to shut up.”

“Otherwise you’ll go squealing to the cops, eh?”

“Cops, hell!” snorted Louie. His gaze, still fixed to George’s mouth, became narrow and glittering, like a snake’s. “Don’t you realize that the Scarlet Salamander himself would give a lot to know who’s stealing his stunt and piling guilt on his head?”

“Oh, so *that’s* your game, is it?”

“That’s my game, yes,” snapped Louie Rigotti. “If I ever told the Scarlet Salamander that Chicago Al Veritt was the guy with the labels, you’d be bumped off inside of an hour. That’s straight goods. You’ve stepped on his toes plenty. He wouldn’t hesitate a minute before hitting

back.”

“Who,” asked George, “is the Scarlet Salamander?”

At this Louie merely laughed; one of those ironic cackles deep in his throat.

“I ain’t here to distribute *that* information, Al,” he sneered. “If you get a slug, believe me, you won’t know where it came from. What’s more, it won’t make any difference to you. As far as you or anybody else is concerned, the Scarlet



“I want five grand, Al”

“What for?”

“To keep what I know to myself.”

George Corbin stepped forward.

*“You dirty little blackmailer,” he
whispered.*

Salamander's name is Scarlet Salamander. That's all.... How about the five grand?"

George Corbin walked slowly to the deep chair beside the window. Frowning, he sank into it; and mechanically his hand reached for the cigarettes on a tray beside him. He began tapping one on the arm of the chair; and went on tapping, tapping, tapping, until Louie impatiently snapped: "Well?"

At that George glanced up and tossed the cigarette back to the tray.

"I've got to consider this, Louie," he said.

"Far as I see, there's nothing to consider!"

"No? Well, five thousand dollars is a lot of money."

"It ain't half of what you've cleaned up this past month with them labels!"

George smiled bitterly. "You seem to know everything," he said. And then, with a hopeless toss of his hands: "But what's the difference? I couldn't give you the money now, anyway. I'd have to raise it."

"Raise it!" Rigotti scoffed, "Say, what're you trying to put over on me? Ain't you got five grand?"

Abruptly George sprang to his feet; so unexpectedly, indeed, that the revolver jerked up wildly, alertly. Young Corbin's face was flushed. Confronting Louie across half the room, he spoke in the harsh, exasperated manner of one whose patience has exploded.

"Listen!" he rapped out. "I've got the money all right! Plenty of it—in the bank! And the chances are a hundred to one that I'll pay you to shut your blackmailing mouth! But I need time to think this thing over. I just can't hand out cash because you happen to *ask* for it! I've got to figure out my position!"

Louie's distorted lip curled up in an ugly, triumphant grin. His eyes half hidden by the brim of his hat, flashed; they were still focussed on George's mouth.

"That's O. K. with me," he said softly. "I didn't expect to collect right on the spot. I'll give you till tonight to get the cash, Al."

"All right! Now beat it!"

"I'll be back about nine," implacably added Louie. "And get this, Al: I'll see to it that a dozen people know where I'm going. In fact, I'll have somebody wait for me downstairs. They won't

know what's happening, or why I came; but they'll know I'm *here!* If I don't come down quick—and healthy—they'll know where to find the reason, too.... I'm telling you this just so's you won't develop any double-crossing ideas. Get me?"

"Oh, get out of here!" said George.

He dropped into the chair again and glared through the window, utterly ignoring his guest. For a few seconds Louie Rigotti waited, unmoving. Then he went to the door—backwards. He kept his revolver at his hip and his eyes leveled at George's chin.

"I'll see you tonight at nine," he said with peculiar emphasis. And the outer door closed upon him.

Instantly George Corbin looked around. He jumped to his feet, and every suggestion of anger disappeared from his young countenance. In its place was born a swift, shrewd smile that brought new liveliness to his brilliant eyes....

CHAPTER V

"Tonight at Nine"



GEORGE opened the window. He leaned out in the afternoon sunshine and watched the sidewalk below until he saw Louie Rigotti emerge from the house and walk rapidly toward Broadway, his hands in his jacket pockets. Then young Corbin grinned.

When he turned from the window, he went directly to the outer door and opened it. He peered from side to side along the corridor, but no one was there.

And now, when he had shut the door, he almost ran to the telephone in his bedroom. There was about him a tense, vibrant eagerness—a kind of enthusiasm—that brought youth and adventurous excitement pushing back to his features.

"Spring 3100!" he called.

He waited impatiently, his luminous eyes silently laughing at the sunshine, his fingers drumming rapidly on the telephone table. When Police Headquarters answered, he asked a connection with the commissioner. "His son speaking!" he added.

Half a minute later he heard his father's interrogative, "Hello?"

"Hello, Dad!" George spoke quickly. "I've just had a great run of luck. Things are humming over here! If the luck continues, I may land the Scarlet Salamander tonight!"

There was an impulsive ejaculation which he did not pause to interpret. He rushed on:

"But I'm going to need some help!"

"Help?" Corbin could not suppress the agitation in his voice. "What kind of help?"

"A man—"

"I'll have Inspector Kern at your place in ten minutes! Or if you prefer to meet him somewhere else, tell me."

"No, no!" George sat on the telephoning table. "Nothing like that. Not Kern, anyhow. I want somebody unknown, Dad, and reliable; somebody to meet me at eight tonight with a taxi. How about that man Hood in your office?"

"What on earth has happened?" Corbin demanded.

"I've got an appointment with a friend of mine tonight," George explained, grinning. "Chap named Louie Rigotti. And it's very possible that he'll introduce me to the Scarlet Salamander himself. Don't ask me for details now, Dad. Too much to do.... How about Hood?"

There was an instant's silence. Then the commissioner snapped: "What do you want Hood to do?"

"I want him to put on a duster and some old clothes—*not a uniform*—and get himself a taxi for the evening. He's to be chauffeur. I'll meet him at eight o'clock in front of Riley's Restaurant at 56th Street and Sixth Avenue. Tell him to keep his meter flag down, or somebody may try to hire him. That's all, Dad. Except—" George hesitated. "Tell him he'd better bring a gun."

"Look here, George!" Commissioner Corbin's voice was suddenly stern and grim. "I don't know just what you're up to, but I won't have you running crazily into danger!"

"Don't worry about me, Dad. I'll get along fine," George laughed.

"You've got to tell me what's happening!"

"Well—all right. I will. But you'll have to wait a while. Can I get you at Headquarters in about an hour?"

"Certainly," snapped the commissioner. "But

why not now?"

"Because I've got to get away from here as quickly as possible, Dad! Right now I've got to pack my things, write an important letter, and skip away. Give me an hour, will you?"

The commissioner finally conceded, though truculently; and George Corbin replaced the receiver on its hook with a loud, decisive click.

The next fifteen minutes he devoted to throwing a haphazard miscellany of his clothes into a suitcase—the same suitcase that contained the packet of labels. And having completed this task, he sat at a small secretary to compose a letter.

In a way, it proved a communication exceedingly difficult to write, for he wished it to produce definite results. Four, five sheets of paper were destroyed before George Corbin finally achieved:

Dear Louie,

Sorry I couldn't stick around to hand you the five grand. But I'm not that kind of fool. By the time you get this, I'll be off in the land of Nobody's Business. And you'll be cursing your head off.

If you want to tell the Salamander about me, go ahead. That's all right with me. I'm not a bit afraid of him. And if it ever comes to a showdown, I guess he'll be willing to listen to reason when I offer him the \$5,000 you wanted.

Why should I pay blackmail money to a snake like you when I can keep it to deal with the Big Gun himself—if it's ever necessary? Go on, tell him about me, Louie. Maybe it'll give him a laugh to know how many of his boys played around with me, never guessing who I was.

My regards to the crowd! And my bow to you! And my laugh for that blindest of fools, the Scarlet Salamander!

Al Veritt.

He sealed the letter in an envelope; and at half past three, with his suitcase in his hand, George Corbin went downstairs. In the lower corridor he spoke to the hallboy.

"William," he said, "I've got to run out of town. I want to leave this note for a man who's to call at nine this evening. You remember him, I think: a round-shouldered chap with a scar on his cheek and a twisted mouth—Mr. Rigotti?"

"Yes, sir. You mean the one who left here

about an hour ago.”

“Right. When he comes tonight, just give him this letter. That’s all.”

A dollar, accompanying the envelope, elicited proportionate thanks.

Suitcase in hand, George Corbin stepped out into the sunshine, the clatter, and clamor of West 54th Street. He hailed a taxicab and directed the chauffeur to a Park Avenue address—his father’s. And then, smiling, he leaned back in the upholstery to smoke his first uninterrupted cigarette of the afternoon.



IT was precisely five minutes to nine in the evening when a dark sedan stopped before Chicago Al Veritt’s house on West 54th Street. Its door swung open before the concave figure of Louie Rigotti. Louie’s hat was drawn so low over his right eyebrow that it concealed half his distorted face.

On the sidewalk he turned to speak to the people in the sedan: a man at the wheel and two women in the rear seat.

“I won’t be long,” he said. “Maybe five minutes. Just wait here.”

One of the women lowered a flask from her cerise lips long enough to blow Louie a kiss from her fingertips. “Toodle-oo! Take your time, sweetheart,” she said. “The night’s still young.”

Louie, utterly ignoring her, thrust his hands into his jacket pockets. He turned, glanced right and left along the street, and walked into the entrance of the house.

Two minutes later he reappeared.

But the Louie who emerged from the door was not the Louie who had entered.

His whole lean figure was quivering with inexpressible fury. His eyes blazed viciously under the hat brim; and his yellow teeth, visible between snarling lips, were like the fangs of a wolf... For he had read Chicago Al Veritt’s taunting letter.

Louie strode straight to the sedan and glared in at its driver.

“Sam,” he said thickly, “I gotta leave you.”

The two women stared. Sam straightened in amazed protest.

“What d’you mean, leave me?” he demanded indignantly.

“I gotta see somebody. Business!”

“And dump these two dames on my hands? Nix, Louie! Cut it out! Hop in here.”

“Aw,” snapped Rigotti, contemptuously, “the hell with the dames. Ditch ‘em. I gotta go, Sam. G’by!”

Without further ceremony, he whirled around and walked savagely toward Broadway. Half way to the corner he signaled a taxicab.

“Run me over Queensboro Bridge to Pembroke Avenue, corner Bell Street,” he ordered through his teeth. “That’s near Flushing. And make it damn snappy, brother!”

While he sat in the darkness of the cab, Louie’s turbulent rage changed in quality until it became a kind of sullen vindictiveness. He began to sneer, his distorted lip twitching and trembling. No one had ever tricked Louie without somehow atoning for it; it wasn’t going to happen now, either. Chicago Al Veritt had thought he was pretty clever when he skipped out of his apartment, had he? Even taunted Louie about going to the Scarlet Salamander and telling him things.... O. K. Al figured he was smart. Other wise guys had felt that way, too; plenty of ‘em. But wait’ll the Salamander picked up Al’s trail. Boy, there’d sure be fireworks!

Louie grinned brutally.

That was because he could not guess that Chicago Al Veritt himself sat in another taxicab, some fifty yards behind in the crowded bridge traffic; a taxicab driven by a policeman named Hood.

And Chicago Al’s eyes were glistening eagerly, excitedly, as he leaned far forward to watch the yellow cab he had followed from West 54th Street.

CHAPTER VI

The Salamander’s Lair



“T’S a tough job,” muttered Hood, “trailing anybody in this crowd.” “You’re doing beautifully!” George assured him. “Once we cross the bridge, it will be much easier. Besides, as long as there are plenty of other cars behind them, they won’t notice us. That’s the silver lining.”

Hood glanced briefly into the small mirror above the windshield. It framed George Corbin’s

tense face and square shoulders; shoulders clothed in smooth, black evening attire. The policeman shook his head.

"I must say, Mr. Corbin, you don't look like a detective trailing a gunman. Anybody'd think you just stepped out of a box at the opera."

"Rotten get-up for this sort of job," George admitted. "Maybe I ought to wear whiskers and a Hindu disguise. I had dinner with my father tonight. Several guests were at the house, and I had to dress to resemble a commissioner's son. After that, there wasn't time to change.... Watch yourself! They're turning left!"

Left. A long stream of traffic swinging around a corner, writhing, halting. Cars in a jumble, snorting impatiently, horns yammering. Then, at the trill of a whistle, a glorious forward charge, as of thoroughbreds darting off at a signal. A triumphant sweep into a wide boulevard where traffic spread and dashed on, unhampered, with a drone of motors throbbing heavily through the street.

"Better stay a block behind them," George cautioned. "We can watch that yellow cab easily enough."

"Got any idea where he's going?"

"None."

The chase continued fifteen minutes, twenty. There was no reason for Louie Rigotti to suspect that anything was wrong. For one thing, he did not glance around. For another, dozens of automobiles were behind him, their headlights flooding the boulevard with golden rivers. He sat still, his hands in his pockets, his hat tugged low, until suddenly he bent forward to tap the window.

"Next corner is Pembroke Avenue," he called. "Turn right four blocks. You can stop at the corner."

On Pembroke Avenue, which was almost deserted, the chase assumed a totally new aspect. Now it had to be wary, shrewd, inconspicuous. Hood, driving the pursuing taxi, applied his brakes and allowed almost two short blocks to intervene between himself and Louie Rigotti's cab. Then he rolled on at a moderate speed.

"Got to play safe, Mr. Corbin," he muttered. "No use spoiling everything now by letting him notice us."

George did not at once reply. He was peering ahead anxiously; and of a sudden he whispered:

"Easy, Hood! I think they're going to stop!"

"What'll I do? Go right past them?"

"No. Wait.... Yes, they're stopping!" he exclaimed abruptly. "Turn into this first corner. Pull up where they won't see us. Quick!"

Hood sent his taxicab into a street a block behind the corner at which Louie had stopped. The maneuver was innocent enough. The policeman drove up to the first house—whose bulk would conceal him from Rigotti's eyes—and rolled to a halt at the curb. He turned his head to say, "Here we—" and checked himself in amazement.

The back of his cab was empty!

But its door swung open, and as he darted a swift look toward Pembroke Avenue, Hood caught a glimpse of a shadow slipping around the corner. Despite himself he smiled grimly. He was about to follow George, but reconsidered and settled back at the wheel to wait. Perhaps the cab would be needed at a second's notice....

In less than five minutes George Corbin was back—panting a little, his eyes agitated, his lips parted. There was something incongruous about his evening clothes at a moment like this.

"Listen, Hood!" he whispered. "I followed him to a house on Bell Street! It's the first one on the other side as you turn right off the Avenue! He went in—and I'm going in, too!"

"What do you expect to do?" Hood demanded.

"I don't know yet. First I'll get in. Before I do anything definite, I want to know whom Louie has gone to see. But I wanted to play safe, too; that's why I came back. *If I'm not out in fifteen minutes, you come for me!*"

Hood sprang down to the sidewalk. His own eyes were almost as bright as George's.

"Why can't I go *with* you?" he snapped.

"It's safer to keep one of us in reserve."

"Nonsense, Mr. Corbin! I can't let you go—"

"Hood," George firmly interrupted, his hand on the man's arm, "this is my party. You stay here. If a policeman should pass, hang on to him for an emergency. But don't go hunting help. I may need you in a hurry."

"How do you expect to get in the house?"

George smiled tightly. "It's a warm night. I guess I'll find an open window somewhere."

"You realize that's burglary?"

“Oh, I don’t mind.... So long, Hood! Fifteen minutes, then come!”

Before the chauffeur could utter another protest, George Corbin had turned and run off. He ran as though he were carrying a football across a gridiron.

Save for two elderly ladies, who gaped at him in outraged astonishment, there was no one on Pembroke Avenue. Even Louie’s taxi had left. George Corbin ran until he reached Bell Street. Then he suddenly slackened his pace to a swift, cautious walk. And his brilliant eyes were fastened on the house into which Louie Rigotti had vanished.

It was a sprawling, wooden dwelling set in the center of the corner lot; a gloomy place that showed no lights at its front. Huge, untrimmed hedges surrounded its grounds and lent it a surly aspect. Indeed, there was something ominous and forbidding in the very atmosphere that enveloped the house.

George circled the hedge until he could peer up at the rear of the place. There, on the upper floor, a single window was illumined. A shade was drawn over it; but occasionally it framed the silhouetted shadow of a man—a grotesque, shapeless shadow that revealed no identity.

Young Corbin glanced along the street. No one was there; no one could see him. He drew a quick breath. Without further hesitation, he returned to the front of the house, entered the grounds, and walked rapidly to inspect the lower windows. The warmth of the summer night became his accomplice; for he saw, with quickening excitement, that several of the windows were slightly open to receive whatever breeze the glorious evening offered.

From far off on the boulevard floated the hum of many motors. Somewhere on Bell Street a radio was pouring a symphony into the night silence. But these were the only sounds George could hear, save the soft treads of his own shoes.

He paused under the first open window and peered about for a final, breathless reconnaissance. His eyes were glimmering like distant stars.

And then, reassured, he did a strange thing.

From his back pocket George Corbin drew a small, black mask; one of those dominoes which had served him at a dozen masquerades. This he

affixed very carefully over his face, so that his eyes glowed mysteriously through the holes in the cloth....

Earlier in the evening, when he had exhibited the little mask to Hood, he had told that astonished policeman: “Just a precaution. If I should unexpectedly bump into Louie or some of the other Salamander boys, it would be safer not to have them recognize me. You see, I’m supposed to be out of New York by this time—running away.” And he had laughed grimly.

With the domino adjusted, he touched his pocket to encounter the encouraging bulk of an automatic. The lips under the mask hardened to a straight line.

George Corbin extended his arms to the ledge of the open window. He pulled his muscular body up with the facile grace of an athlete. Momentarily he sat on the sill, swinging his legs into the room.

Then he stood still, listening.

Somewhere a clock was ticking. Somewhere else a curtain sighed to a fitful breeze. Otherwise the house was as quiet as it was dark. Fully a minute he waited there, while his eyes accustomed themselves to the somberness and made a mental chart of the disposition of the furniture in the chamber.

Presently, on his toes, he crossed the room, one hand gripping the automatic in his pocket. Emerging through a wide door, he found himself in a corridor, at the bottom of a flight of carpeted stairs. Here he paused, peering upward.

George had neither the intention nor the power to make an arrest. His purpose was solely to see Louie’s host; to acquire evidence—if there really was any—which would lead to the identification of the Scarlet Salamander. Then he would depart as he had come. If necessary, the police could be summoned to raid the place within ten minutes.

He started up the stairs.

As he approached their top, he caught the vague mumble of men’s voices. Indistinct, unintelligible, it rumbled from some distant point at the rear of the house; probably from the room he had seen illumined. To George’s ears the sound came as a Siren song, luring his steps.

He moved along the upper hall with the caution of a burglar. His left hand sought

guidance along the wall, his right maintained its hold on the automatic.

And then, suddenly, he reached a door within which glowed a single, dim light....

A pale light, dimmer than a candle, shaded in blue. It threw a vague aura that was oddly weird. Affixed to the wall opposite the door, it illuminated only the space immediately around it. The rest of the chamber was quite shadowy.

George halted; listened. The mumble of voices seemed to issue from somewhere beyond this room, though he saw no other door. His brows contracted, and the eyes that glowed out of the mask darted about searchingly.

He stepped into the chamber. Like the stairs, it was richly carpeted, and his treads yielded no betraying sounds. He went to the center of the room; and there, slowly turning, he peered from wall to wall—and abruptly checked his breath. His eyes widened, flashed. His lips parted.

He was filled with a sense of unreality. It was as if he were moving through a dream. For the thing he discovered in the wall seemed wholly incongruous in a modern house. It was a small aperture, partly open now. Beyond it hung something dark—a curtain, he thought; and it was through this the voices came.

George went to the hole, very cautiously he thrust his hand through it, moved the curtain an inch....

The first thing he saw was the curved back of Louie Rigotti!

Louie was talking to someone; talking bitterly.

Slightly shifting his position, George saw over Rigotti's shoulder the yellow, fleshy countenance of fat Felix Meller.... Saw it in profile, for Felix had his head averted and was scowling at the floor, his sensuous, feminine lips puckered in a kind of sullen pout.

George drew a long, swift breath. His whole chest was thundering. He started to move farther, to command a more complete view of that room.

And in stepping aside, his feet left the carpet. It trod on a plank that emitted a raucous squeak of protest.

Louie Rigotti whirled around, his eyes blazing through the aperture, And the mask he saw brought a gasp from him, caused him to leap back.

"Shut it!" he yelled hoarsely.

Even as George raised his automatic, the hole in the wall disappeared. Something snapped over it sharply, with a smart, loud clap.

George swung around and dashed toward the door. No use staying here to fight these men. If he could get Hood.... He reached the hall and ran on toward the stairs. They were only a few yards from him. He was already at the top step when, behind, he heard a door crash against a wall.

At the sound he spun around, his automatic coming up defensively. Down the corridor a shaft of golden light plunged out of a room. And in that light stood Louie Rigotti. Louie had a revolver in his hand, at the hip. He fired. He fired twice. Flashes of red. Cracks as of whiplashes. Louie himself did not move.

Something hot and searing stabbed George Corbin's left shoulder. It carried a force that staggered him, whirled him around off his balance. His fingers allowed the automatic to slip to the floor. His hand leaped out to seize the banister—and missed. It fumbled, groped.... He was reeling crazily, teetering backwards on the top step.

Crimson sparks were flashing before his eyes, and the dark walls swam and swayed about him dizzily. He tried to fight against something, to gain a foothold. A desperate word burst from his lips.

And suddenly he fell back—back into infinite, terrible blackness....

CHAPTER VII

The Scarlet Salamander!



LAP his jaw."

"Another shot of whiskey."

Slowly the phrases oozed into George Corbin's consciousness. He did not immediately open his eyes, but sat with his head dangling loosely, his chin resting on his chest. A blazing pain filled his shoulder, and his temples were throbbing with violent pangs.

"It ain't the slug that knocked him cold," Louie Rigotti speaking, contemptuously. "It's the Brody he took to the bottom of the stairs."

"Shut up!" This peremptorily, from Felix Meller. "He's coming to."

George listened and tried to focus his mind on what was happening. He sat in an armchair. His legs stretched out loosely, and his hanging arms were limp. A queer weakness, as of utter exhaustion, left his body lax and slumping.

When at last he opened his eyes, he found Louie Rigotti standing directly in front of him.

Louie, with his hands in his jacket pockets, was grinning; an ugly grin which his misshapen mouth distorted to a gargoyle's leer. He was squinting at George Corbin's chin, with eyes that glittered unnaturally.

"Hello," he said, almost genially.

The fat man who sat beside him, however—

be coming! The thing to do was to keep these men here as they were, to delay any action or departure, to hold their attention.... It would be only a few moments....

"You're a pretty wise guy, ain't you?" Louie mocked. "Trailed me here like a regular dick."

George regarded him without interest.

"Well," chuckled Louie, "now that you're here, what're you gonna do?"

"Keep quiet!" Felix Meller interrupted irritably. He rose, thrust out a pudgy hand, and jerked up the prisoner's chin. Narrowly he peered into George's eyes. "Feel ready to talk?"

George said, "Well?" And the strange



Louie Rigotti whirled around...and what he saw caused him to leap back. "Shut it!" he yelled hoarsely.

Felix Meller—had furrowed his brows in anxiety. Visibly, he was worried. He leaned forward a little, his knees far apart and his hands clasped over them like claws.

George looked at him dully. But behind his opaque stare his mind was functioning again. It worked faster and faster, like some machine gaining momentum, until his thoughts were lucid and sharp and crackling.

How long had he been unconscious? Certainly not fifteen minutes, or Hood would have.... *Hood!*... A brilliant flash of hope tore across George Corbin's brain. Hood would soon

hoarseness of his voice startled him; it was almost unrecognizable.

"What about those labels?" asked Meller.

"Oh." Young Corbin shot a taunting glance toward Rigotti. "So Louie decided to quit double-crossing you, eh?"

"What d'you mean, double-cross us?"

"Nothing; except that he offered to forget the labels if I paid him five grand."

Astonished, Meller turned shrinking eyes toward Louie. And the scarred man suddenly flushed crimson, so that the *zigzag* on his cheek became purple. He shifted his position, and his

lips twitched. That glittering gaze of his fastened itself on Meller's chest.

"That's a damned lie!" he said harshly.

"Yeah?" whispered the fat man. "I hope so, Louie. For your own sake!"

"Where d'you get that line?" Louie snapped defiantly.

"Well, you know what happened to Dutch Dorgan for trying the double-cross."

"Aw, don't be a sap!" Louie snarled. "This guy is lying! I never even mentioned labels to him!"

Felix Meller looked craftily over George's head. It was the first intimation the young man had that anyone was behind him. He wanted, of a sudden, to look around. But his head ached dreadfully, and the mere effort of moving it was tortuous. He sat still, alert, watching a slow, ugly smile crawl over Meller's pendulous lips, linger an instant, then vanish.

The fat man glanced down again, with a quick scowl. "Well?" he asked. "What about those labels?"

"Louie has told you," George replied in that altered voice.

"You can tell us a lot more!"

"I'm afraid not."

And then the unseen man behind George Corbin spoke; spoke softly, with confidence that somehow seemed unctuous.

"Oh, yes, you can—*Mr. Corbin!*"

George's muscles snapped to tense rigidity. His eyes widened as flames leaped in them. Corbin, the man had said.... It was not merely the discovery that these people knew his identity which astounded him; it was the familiarity of that sharp, nasal voice behind him.

He heard slow, deliberate steps. Someone was moving around his chair. Felix Meller and Louie slightly withdrew, as if to leave ample space in front of the prisoner. And in a moment George Corbin was looking up, in amazement, at the small, one-armed antique dealer—Mr. Horatio Stegg!



NO longer was Mr. Stegg timid or frightened or distressed. All the nervousness he had exhibited in the office of the Police Commissioner had vanished. Here, in his own environment, the

meager man appeared grim, stubborn, and wholly confident of himself; indeed, there was something actually masterful about his bearing.

"So," he said quietly, "the myth of Chicago Al Veritt is ended."

George drew a breath that quivered a little despite himself.

"Like the myth," he answered slowly, "of Mr. Horatio Stegg."

(Good Lord, where on earth was Hood?)

"I," corrected Stegg, without emotion, "was never a myth."

"Only the impersonation," George suggested shrewdly, "of the Scarlet Salamander."

Mr. Stegg briefly smiled his acknowledgment—a dry, mirthless smile. And as George realized that he sat before the leader of that ruthless organization of criminals he had attempted to identify, a curious prickling coursed through his whole body. He eyed Stegg closely, alertly.

"My position is immaterial now," the one-armed man reminded him. "What I want to clear up is this: How about the salamander labels Louie found in your suitcase?"

"They speak for themselves."

"Not very clearly."

"Well—" The young man paused. For an instant he shut his eyes, as if his wound had stabbed new pain through him. But in that instant he considered rapidly. If he could prolong this conversation until Hood arrived, the situation in this house might be altogether altered. Perhaps Hood was already slipping in through some window.... Looking back at Stegg, George essayed a futile shrug. "What do you want to know about the labels?"

"Everything!"

"That's vague."

"All right." Stegg's eyes crinkled at the corners. "I'll be specific. In the first place, were they purposely *planted* in the suitcase?"

George smiled weakly. "Of course."

"Why?"

"You're clever enough to see that—now."

Stegg nodded after a moment of silence, and his nod was not without a certain tribute of appreciation.

"H'm," he muttered. "Ye—es, I think I do see." Briefly he glared at Louie. "Perhaps," he said, "you put them there so that some idiot who

works for me would discover them—and rush to me with the news—and lead you to me at the same time. Eh?”

“Perhaps.”

“But,” snapped Mr. Stegg, with new sharpness in his voice, “that doesn’t explain everything, Mr. Corbin! It doesn’t explain the eight robberies committed in the name of the Scarlet Salamander—for which I was never responsible!”

George’s feeble smile, half mocking, momentarily returned. Almost imperceptibly he shook his head.

“That’s something you’ll have to figure out for yourself,” he said.

“Oh, no. You’re going to tell us!”

“I don’t see why I should.” And desperately, as he spoke, he thought of Hood. Where was the man? Surely it was more than fifteen minutes!

“You’re going to tell us,” quietly said Mr. Stegg, “because it is the only way you can save yourself. Those eight robberies were committed under my labels. I have the name—I’m entitled to the game. That’s blunt, Mr. Corbin. There’s no need to waste words.”

And now George understood why he was being questioned at all. Horatio Stegg was angling for the proceeds of those mysterious Salamander thefts. But also, George understood something else—and the knowledge sent a shiver through him, tightened his whole lax figure. These men intended to kill him; so much Stegg’s words, “save yourself,” indicated. They *must* kill him! With what he now knew, George Corbin would never be permitted to go free....

He thought again, more desperately, of Hood.

And at that precise moment someone knocked loudly at what was apparently the wall.

George’s heart pounded at the sound. Like the others in the room, he turned his head. At one side of the chamber hung a long blue curtain—a curtain on which crawled the ungainly scarlet figure of a salamander! Horatio Stegg went to it briskly, and his single arm raised the cloth to reveal the aperture in the wall through which George himself had so recently peered. A face was there—the face of a stranger.

“O. K.,” he said. “Open up.”

Stegg reached down and slid back what might have been a door or a panel. Three men

entered the room, and at the sight of them George Corbin almost sprang from his chair. His lips parted, but no ejaculation escaped them. He could only stare in stupefaction.

For the first man was Hood—pale, fiery-eyed. And the other two were jamming revolvers into Hood’s back!...

Stegg turned to evince, for a second, his humorless smile. He said softly: “I hardly thought you had come alone, Mr. Corbin. So I sent these men out to reconnoiter.”

In the transformation that overwhelmed George Corbin at that moment was something wild, savage, uncontrollable. It blazed in his eyes, left his face utterly white. Gaping at Hood, he saw the last vestige of hope destroyed. He was trapped here; trapped and defeated! In a few minutes Stegg would tire of this inquisition; and then—

George forgot his wound, forgot his pain, forgot even his weakness. The ground seemed to have been whisked away from under his feet. He sent his stare darting about the room, swiftly, almost in panic. And suddenly he saw a door. An *open* door. Open merely an inch, but far enough to bring a rush of mad inspiration. From that threshold Louie had shot at him; therefore it gave upon the corridor....

George looked back at the others. Stegg was ordering Hood toward a corner. For the moment Hood had become the center of interest. And George trembled as he gathered his strength for a final wild effort.

If he could dash out and lock himself in another room, a room from which he might shout for help—

He did not complete the thought.

Where he found the strength he never knew. It came from some reservoir of will, not of muscle. The thought and the action occupied less than a second.

He lunged out of his chair. Hurling himself across the room and pulled the door open wide. As he leaped out, Louie Rigotti shouted; Stegg cursed; Felix Meller whirled around in bewilderment. They went after him, but George, in the corridor, pulled the door closed with a deafening crash.

His hand sought a key, but there was none. At the same time he saw another door less than five feet away, across the hall. And he actually

threw himself at it.

But the exertions of the past second were too much for his weakened body. George never reached that other door. He went half way to it, then stumbled, lurched against the wall. He tried to keep himself erect, but somehow his knees sagged under him, crumpling, going down, down, while his arms desperately clung to the wall. He was dizzy and sick, and a strange sob burst from him.

Oddly, he did not hear anyone come toward him.

His first knowledge that others were in the corridor seeped into his mind when somebody stepped on his hand. The pain momentarily snatched his mind out of its haze. And he saw men—dashing through the darkness about him! Men, he dazedly realized, whom he had not seen before—a veritable crowd of them!

There were yells, howls, a shot—two more shots. What was happening he did not know. Things were blurred, dark, misshapen. They whirled around him. Men—men! Shadows, ghosts. Where they came from, he did not know; nor where they went.

An arm was around his shoulders, squeezing, shaking. A hand was raising his chin, eyes were burning into his eyes out of the blackness. And a voice whispered: “George, George!”

But George did not answer. He tried to smile. And even the smile failed. It didn’t matter. Nothing much mattered now. He had recognized that whispering voice, and that was enough. *It was his father’s!...*



TWO full days passed before George Corbin, at home in bed, could listen to explanations. And then he heard them from Commissioner Corbin himself. The white-haired official sat at the bedside, and his low voice was vibrant:

“I couldn’t let you try it alone, George!” he said. “I called Inspector Kern, and we trailed your taxi. We had six men with us. I didn’t want to spoil your plans, so I let you go ahead on your own. When you parked near Pembroke Avenue, we parked a block away. Kern wanted to run up to you, but I insisted on letting you do things your own way—until we saw two men come out of nowhere and put guns into Hood’s back. Then, of

course, we followed them, saw which house they entered, and made the raid. That’s all.”

George could smile now, and he did. But when he spoke, he was astonished to find his voice a hoarse whisper.

“Get them all, Dad?”

“Certainly—though Louie Rigotti’s in the hospital with bullet wounds. He tried to—shoot his way free.”

“What about the labels?”

“What do you mean?”

George turned his head the better to peer into his father’s eyes. “I’ve never understood,” he whispered, “why Stegg had to label all his robberies.”

The commissioner smiled grimly. He shook his head.

“That’s a story in itself,” he said. “Feel strong enough to listen?”

“Hearing the story,” said George, “will be better than medicine and bandages. Go ahead, Dad.”

Corbin drew his chair closer to the bed, and frowned through the window.

“Well,” he muttered, “this is it. Horatio Stegg’s first robbery was committed by himself. A small job. Silverware. He wrapped it all in a curtain he pulled from a door—that salamander curtain. When he reached home, he realized that his single arm was a handicap. He could never try really big jobs. And so, eventually, he hit oh the idea of having *other* men do his work for him. He went into the antique business—as a blind, of course, primarily; but he had another motive, too. That business gave him a legitimate reason for entering wealthy homes with his wares. In that way he could plan jobs which men he hired executed for him. He paid them more than fences would, and so they remained with him.

“But you want to know about the labels. I’ll jump to that phase of it.

“Stegg wanted expert crooks in his gang—men experienced in cracking safes, in breaking into locked windows. To attract them, he had to demonstrate that his organization was succeeding. That’s why he invented the idea of the label—using the salamander simply because it was suggested by his first robbery. When the newspapers began to speak of the Scarlet Salamander thefts, they gained notoriety in the

underworld. And crooks became curious. Rather anxious to join an organization that could successfully get away with so many major robberies. That's exactly what Stegg wished to happen, of course. And that's the entire explanation of the labels."

For a while George lay silent, thinking, frowning at the ceiling. Presently, however, he turned troubled eyes toward his father.

"What about Dorgan?" he whispered. "And the Florentine necklace?"

"Let's invert the question. The Florentine necklace first. That was a legitimate transaction. Stegg told us of it because it was the easiest way to explain the attempted robbery at his flat. What actually occurred, however, was this: Dutch Dorgan, knowing Stegg kept plenty of cash in his home, tried to steal from his boss. The old double-cross which failed. That's all.... But George—" Commissioner Corbin's gaze narrowed searchingly as he peered into his son's eyes.

"Yes, Dad?"

"I've got a question for you to answer."—softly.

"Yes?"

"How do you explain the eight robberies—under salamander labels—which Stegg denies having done?"

George managed a faint grin. "They never happened," he whispered.

"Eh? They were reported!"

"Yes, I know." The young man drew a deep breath and closed his eyes. As if to himself, he spoke softly. "I wanted to attract the Scarlet Salamander to me, since I couldn't find the road

to him. I thought if I 'stepped on his toes,' as Louie Rigotti put it, he'd resent it quickly and seek me out. Well—" George paused and again breathed deeply. "I had those labels printed. I went around to a few of my college fraternity brothers—eight of them in New York—and got them to report robberies which didn't happen. Being your son, I took the privilege of assuring them that nothing in the line of a penalty would come to them. I hope you'll stick by me on that, Dad."

"Why—" Commissioner Corbin half rose, then settled back in amazement. He said nothing else, but stared.

"Had to do it," George explained. "The Department would never allow a hoax like that, so I had to keep it secret. Then I left the labels around where they might be found by the Salamander's men. When Louie reported Dorgan's death, I knew there was a connection between Louie and Dorgan—and the Salamander. So I sent Louie to a closet where he'd find the labels. That's about all." He opened his eyes and asked irrelevantly. "How did the papers take it all?"

And then, quite abruptly, Commissioner Corbin himself grinned. He shook his head and even chuckled.

"Fine!" he said. Again he chuckled as some memory illuminated his eyes. "There's a cartoon today of a policeman putting a sword through a salamander."

George smiled and sighed.

"After all," he whispered, "they're really gentlemen—the gentlemen of the press!"