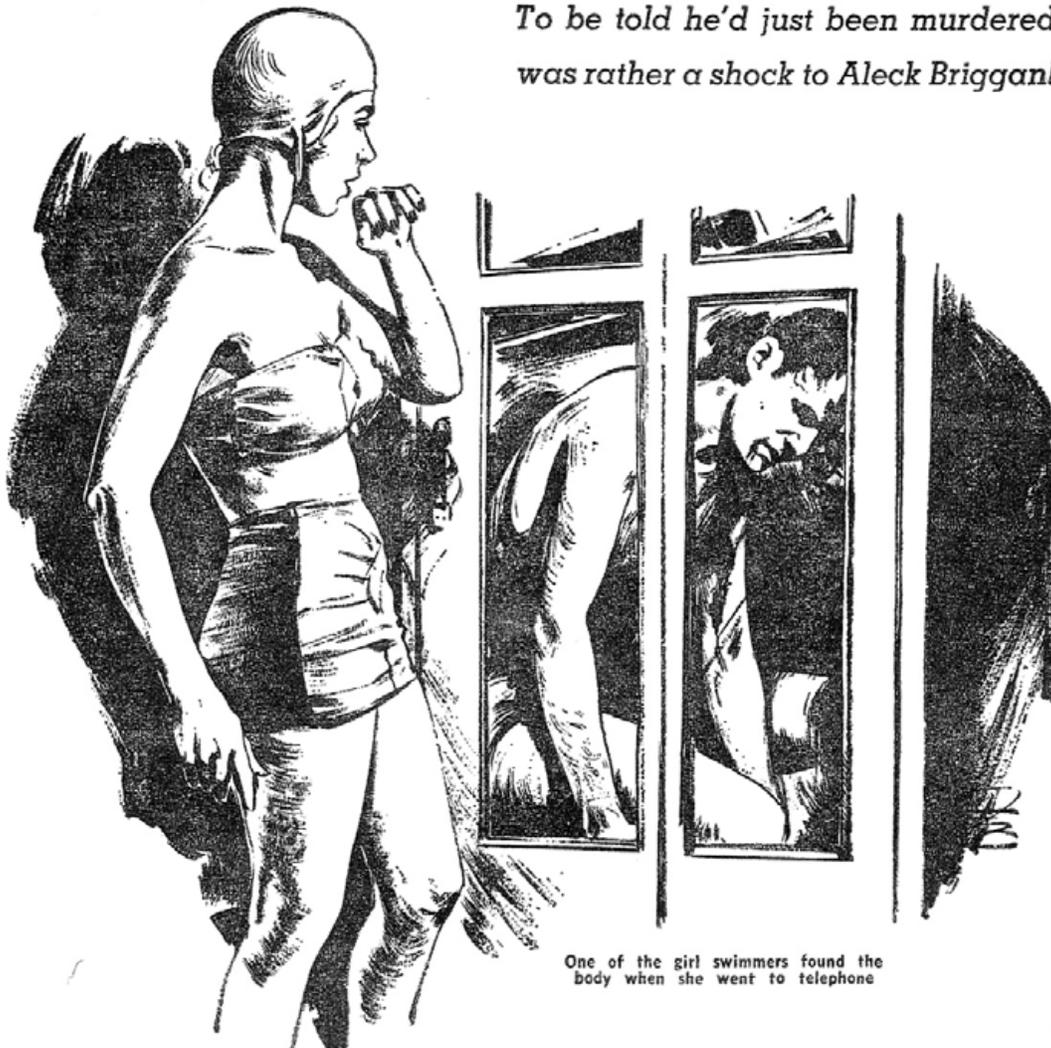


*To be told he'd just been murdered  
was rather a shock to Aleck Briggan!*



## **A Corpse for a Client**

**by J. JAY BLAIR**

**T**HE Park Palace Hotel had three entrances—one on the Avenue, one on Fifty-third Street, and one on Fifty-fourth. Aleck Briggan directed the taxi driver to the one on Fifty-fourth. It was raining, and he was in a hurry. He had already been gone over half an hour.

Descending, he thrust his right hand into the pocket of his *cafe au lait* gabardine slacks. His fingers encountered keys, a cigarette lighter—then he

remembered. He put a hand in the left pocket quickly, wondering if the driver had noticed. A man who could not remember in which pocket his money was kept would appear a queer fish.

He paid off the cab and hurried through a revolving door to the lobby. There he turned right down a broad flight of carpeted steps. On the wall was a bronze plaque in which was molded an arrow and the words, "To the Pool." He

followed the arrow to another flight of stairs.

Here, at a desk set into a recess, sat a shapely miss wearing a one-piece purple bathing suit, long artificial eyelashes, and nothing else—a lure calculated to attract male custom to the pool. Her lacquered hair was lavender under the fluorescent light. She gave him a numbered stub for his fifty-cent piece, and he descended a second flight, a little slower, because they were of marble and felt strange to his feet, perhaps because he was wearing no socks inside his Scotch grain brogues.

Something was wrong in the pool. There was no attendant on the high stool at the foot of the stairs to take his ticket, hand him a suit, and show him to a cubicle. No one was swimming. Under the indirect lighting around the edges of the vaulted roof the surface of the water undulated glassily, showing a faint bluish tinge. The marble-slabbed area around the rim was empty, as was the spectators' gallery. The bathers who had been there half an hour earlier were in the lounge, perhaps.

Aleck Briggan rounded the corner of the pool. He passed a dead-end aisle on which faced a dozen or so locked cubicles. The attendant carried a pass-key with which he admitted patrons, and after they had adequately tired, cooled, or exhibited themselves, he admitted them a second time. Snap locks prevented illicit entry in between.

**B**EYOND was the lounge, a square room separated from the pool by three fluted columns. In it were iron tables and chairs, a waiter to bring drinks.

"Just a minute, mister." A hand on Aleck's arm halted him. It belonged to a uniformed policeman. "Where you goin'?"

A quick glance showed Aleck that the swimmers, in their suits, were in the

lounge, gathered in uneasy groups like frightened sheep—four or five girls, and twice that many men. His glance did not find the face he sought.

"I'm looking for someone," he said.

"Where did you come from, just now?"

"I just came in from the street." Aleck held out his ticket stub. Tiny drops of rain, glistening on the sleeve of his tan topcoat, corroborated him.

"What's the name of this person you're looking for?"

"Sid Salter," said Aleck boldly.

The officer shook his head. "Look for him some other time. The pool is closed. A man was just killed here—murdered."

Aleck stared. "Who—" he began.

"His name," said the cop, "was Briggan—Alexander Briggan."

Aleck Briggan was a young man, and not inclined to be introspective. He had never thought much about dying, even during the war. But to be told that he himself had just been murdered was a shock.

The policeman, however, was at home with the subject." He was accustomed to encountering it frequently under violent and unpleasant circumstances. He was also inured to the shocking effect of such news, so he was not surprised when Aleck gaped and turned pale.

"All right," he said. "Run along now. Come back some other day."

Aleck opened his mouth to protest, but there was a dam in his throat. Thoughts raced dizzily round and round in his brain. There was obviously some mistake, but before he could find words to protest there came a diversion from the main staircase.

It must have taken two cars to hold them all. A medical examiner carrying a small bag, followed by an assistant carrying a larger one. A man carrying a camera, and his assistant lugging a huge

black suitcase. Six more assorted specialists carrying boxes, bags, brief cases, notebooks. The reconnaissance squad of detectivism.

The cop gave Aleck a shove as he said, "This way, Doc."

He led the way to the back of the lounge, where a narrow door in the rear wall bore a blue enameled sign saying "Telephone." The glass-topped door was propped open and a cop was watching it from the hallway. When an officer pulled open the door from the lounge, Aleck could look straight through into the booth.

He saw there the figure of a man of about his own build, slumped on the seat, the head toppled forward against the mouthpiece. A dark ugly stain discolored the bathing suit he wore. The face was twisted outward, the eyes partially open, and in them was an expression of frozen surprise.

It was the face of Sid Salter.

Again Aleck opened his mouth to speak, but this time his own judgment restrained him. He saw, suddenly, that he was in a position he could not explain. He dared not ask a question.

The gray-haired man holding the pants came from the aisle by the cubicles and nodded to the later arrivals.

"We've located his clothes," he said. "Plenty of identification." He turned to the group of shivering bathers. "We'll want your names and addresses. And answers to a few questions. Then we'll let you get dressed. Now which is the girl who discovered the body?"

Aleck pushed his hands deep in the pockets of the tan topcoat and sidled along the damp marble floor, forcing himself not to hurry. The high stool at the foot of the staircase was still unoccupied. He mounted the steps, sauntered past the lavender-haired blonde, and headed for the street.

On Fifty-fourth Street he turned west, walking rapidly, but halfway up the block he slowed to a halt. Where was he going? The room on Sixty-fifth? If the police were not already there, they soon would be. The Jeddison? That was dangerous; he might not have the same luck. Where then? What was he going to do? Who was he now?

THE next morning Leon Amy, counselor-at-law, unhurriedly flipped the pages of his newspaper. His eye was caught and held by:

#### MURDER IN POOL

Visitor to City Shot in Phone Booth at Park Palace

Amy read the story which followed at first, with mild interest, but with more when he read that the murdered man had been identified from his clothing and other possessions as Alexander Briggan, a stranger to New York living temporarily in a rooming house at Three-eighteen West Sixty-fifth Street. From papers in his pockets he was known to have been recently in Iceland. Other papers showed that during the war he had been a sergeant with the Six Hundred and Eighty-eighth Air Service Group, in Europe.

Amy lifted his eyes and stared hard at the blank wall.

"Briggan," he muttered "Briggan? Why, yes! A tech sergeant in the engineering section. Good man, as I recall."

During the war Amy had been a major, and for over a year in the E.T.O. had commanded the Six Hundred and Eighty-eighth Group. This outfit had numbered something over seven hundred men, it had been impossible for him to know each one personally. But his memory once aroused, recalled the name.

The telephone call which had been interrupted by the murder, the newspaper story informed, had been traced to the Silver Cellar, a rowdy bar and night club on West Fiftieth Street. The caller had asked for Mike Piel, an habitu  of the place. Mike had not been around, and the bartender, returning to the phone to report this, had been unable to get any response and hung up.

Mike Piel was a bookie and horseplayer of some small renown. He had declared to detectives that he knew nothing whatsoever of any person named Alexander Briggan. If no relatives or friends claimed the body, it would be buried in Potter's Field.

Amy frowned at his desk for a while. Then, calling Police Headquarters, he got hold of Detective-Sergeant Burgard who was handling the Briggan case. The lawyer tried to explain his vague feeling of responsibility, based on the tradition of the Service that a commanding officer always takes care of his men, especially when they are in trouble. He would, he said, pay for a funeral rather than let one of his boys go to Potter's Field.

"That's all right, of course," said the detective. "Maybe you'd better come to Headquarters—straighten out details."

The evening papers had only a short squib which did not mention the Park Palace. It did state, that a lawyer named Amy, of Twenty-two West Fortieth Street had volunteered to handle the decedent's affairs, and pay funeral expenses.

The following afternoon the lawyer received a telephone call.

"Major Amy?" a voice asked. "You used to be with the Six Hundred and Eighty-eighth?"

Surprised, he said yes. He never used his military title any more, and few of his business acquaintances knew of it.

"I can tell you something about the Briggan case," he was told. "My name is North—Ten East Fortieth. Could you come over and see me? I'll wait."

Amy, mustering his dignity, said that he was accustomed to doing business in his own office. What sort of information was it?

"Quite important. Ten East Fortieth is right in the next block, Major. Just look in the building directory for North."

Amy, grumbling, said he would try to make it.

The building was a towering skyscraper between Fifth and Madison. In the lobby, the building directory covered a hundred square feet of wall. Major Amy's eye searched the listings, but he failed to find any individual named North. Puzzled, he was about to go and speak to the starter when he felt a touch on his arm.

"Major Amy?"

He turned to see a tall young man in a tan topcoat, and a soft brown hat which seemed a trifle too small for him.

"I'm the man who called you. Can we go somewhere and talk?"

Amy frowned. "Mr. North? I thought you said—" Suddenly his eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. His head gave a little jerk, as if a glass of cold water had been thrown in his face. "Briggan!" he gasped. "But I thought you—the papers said—"

"Sh-h-h!" cautioned Aleck Briggan, steering him to the street. "I know—but there's a mistake. That's what I want to talk about, Major."

AS they turned east on Fortieth, Amy noticed that the eyes of the man beside him were furtive and restless, and that while he wore a half-smile, it was pale and tense around the edges.

"It's not possible," muttered Amy. "Why, I—I identified your body at the

morgue, yesterday! And arranged for an undertaker.”

“I’m very grateful for what you’ve done, Major. Perhaps you can help me straighten this thing out.”

He would say no more until they reached a bar beyond Lexington, and were settled in a booth in the rear. There, over rye and soda, he began at the beginning.

“I was discharged in January of Forty-six, Major, after we got back from E.T.O. I hail from a little village in Wisconsin, but there was nothing there for me to go back to. My father and mother were both killed in a traffic accident before the war, my only brother vanished on Iwo Jima, and my sister is married and lives in Peru. So after loafing a month or two, I signed up for a construction job in Iceland. I’ve been there ever since, till two weeks ago I hit New York with almost three thousand dollars saved.”

Amy’s eyebrows lifted. “I found travelers’ checks for one thousand in your room, on Sixty-fifth. What happened to the rest of it?”

“You’ll hear.” Aleck grinned wryly. “I fell for a horse racket as old as the hills, but it had a new twist to it. I knew no one in New York, but I scraped an acquaintance in a bar. A young fellow named Sid Salter, a likeable sort, and frank to admit that he was a tout with an inside track to the feed-box. He talked me into giving him fifty bucks to bet on a sure thing out at Aqueduct. Well, the nag won, and paid six-forty in the mutuels.”

Amy grunted. “Only his bookie paid a lot less, eh?”

“No—that was the new twist. He didn’t use a bookie. He sent the money out to the track and bet it there. To prove it he showed me the pari-mutuel tickets, asked if I wanted to let what I’d won ride on another trip, or cash in. I asked for the cash, just to see if he’d come through. He

did. Next morning he handed me a hundred and forty-four dollars. Full track odds, less ten per cent for him.”

Amy nodded thoughtfully. “The old come-on.”

“Of course,” agreed Aleck. “So then I gave him five hundred. That time the horse came in sixth.”

“How do you know he ever bet the five hundred at all?”

“He showed me the pari-mutuel tickets. The fourth race, the post number, the date—everything checked with the listings in the newspapers. It was just a bad break—he claimed. Well, I was leery, but not leery enough. He had a sure thing two days later, a horse named Wise Tiger. Good odds. We could clean up all I’d lost, plus plenty more, if only I’d make a real bet. Like a fool, I fell, and gave him fifteen hundred bucks—all the cash I had.”

Amy grinned sourly. “So the horse fell on his face?”

“That’s just it! The horse won. But I couldn’t find Sid. He had vanished. I don’t think he ever placed the bet, but just put the fifteen hundred in his pocket, and the devil with me. Well, I was plenty sore. I didn’t know where he lived, and I could never catch him in the little bar where we first met. But—”

“Wait a minute,” cut in Amy. “Where was this little bar?”

“The Silver Cellar, on West Fiftieth Street. It’s a hangout for the racetrack crowd. Sid seemed to know everybody there.”

“Did he know a bird named Mike Piel?”

“Yes, he introduced me to Mike once. But then he sort of kept us apart. I gathered that Mike had some connection with the game. Maybe that’s where Sid got his hot tips. I don’t know.”

“I begin to smell . . . But no. Go ahead with your story.”

“Well, Sid had spoken several times of swimming in a pool. He hadn’t named the Park Palace, but it seemed a good bet. So I was watching for him there. I was there Tuesday afternoon.”

Amy leaned forward. “What happened?”

“I couldn’t hang around the pool in my clothes, so I bought a ticket and put on a suit, leaving my clothes in Cubicle Number Thirty-four the one the attendant had put me in. I was in the pool swimming, when I saw Sid. He had come in, had undressed, and was just coming out of the cubicle next to mine—Number Thirty-three. He slammed the door—that locks the snap lock—and came out. He never noticed me and anyway my face was under water as I swam across the pool. When I climbed out he was on the diving platform. And then I got a screwy idea.”

Amy muttered, “This is it,” and listened intently.

“I beckoned to the attendant, and said, ‘Open up a minute, will you? I want to phone. I need a nickel.’ But I had my hand on the door of Thirty-three not Thirty-four. He never noticed the difference. He naturally thought I knew my own number. If he *had* noticed, I’d have claimed a mistake. He unlocked the door.”

**B**RIGGAN paused to take a long drink from his glass.

“My idea was that I might find something in Sid’s clothes to back up the accusations I was going to make. Up to then it was just my word against his. But all I found was a hotel key from the Jeddison, an unpaid hotel bill, and about eighteen hundred dollars in bills—my dollars. Then I thought: there might be something in his room. He and I were about the same build. In his clothes, and with the key in my hand, it would be easy. I dressed in his clothes as fast as I could,

stuffing the socks in the pockets and not stopping to button the shirt. I walked out, took a taxi to the Jeddison, and used the stairs, not the elevator, to go up to his room.”

“I begin to get it,” murmured Amy. “While you were there, Sid Salter was shot in the phone booth. They found a wet bathing suit in Thirty-three, but your clothes in Thirty-four, so they identified the dead man as Alexander Briggan. By the time you got back, it was too late to explain. They wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Exactly,” agreed Aleck anxiously. “If I try to tell the police this story now, they’ll accuse me of killing him, of course. I had motive and opportunity both; plenty. I don’t know *what* to do.”

“What did you do?” asked the lawyer.

“I got out of the Park Palace without being suspected. I didn’t dare go back to my room. I’d have run right into the investigation of my own murder. The Jeddison was dangerous. Luckily I had plenty of money in my pockets—or at least in *his* pockets. I took a room over on Tenth Avenue, and I’ve been lying low.”

Amy eyed him keenly, steadily. “Did you kill Sid?”

Aleck’s eyes did not falter. “No,” he said flatly.

Amy nodded slowly. “I’ll accept that. Now tell me—what did you find in his room at the Jeddison?”

Aleck reached in his pocket and tossed out a dozen or more pari-mutuel tickets.

“The answer—those, and several hundred more like them. In a complete series of post numbers, all perfect except for the date. And a dating stamp, locked in the desk.”

The lawyer examined them closely. “That was the game—counterfeit tickets. That’s how he backed up his lies, without ever going near the track. . . How about

the plates these were printed from?"

Aleck shook his head. "Nowhere in sight. I haven't been back, but I've kept the room in Sid's name. I didn't want his disappearance noticed too soon, so I paid the rent for a week. Sent a Western Union messenger around with that unpaid bill, and thirty bucks in cash. The messenger told them to shove the receipted bill under the door."

Amy asked several more questions. Then began musing out loud.

"I want to kill Sid Salter. Never mind why. I know he frequently swims at the Park Palace, so I look over the layout there, noting the position of the telephone booth. Learning that he means to take a dip on Tuesday, I get word to him, by anyone of a dozen methods, to call someone he knows at, say, five o'clock. Mike Piel, for example. I station myself in the spectators' gallery. When I see him go toward the booth, I slip around to the service stairs—"

Aleck was nodding. "I've reasoned that far myself."

"So has Detective-Sergeant Burgard. Only so far he's been hunting for the killer of Alexander Briggan. If he starts looking for the killer of Sid Salter—" He reached over to grip Aleck's arm. "Did you say you still have the key to that room?"

Aleck nodded again, and was jerked to his feet. "Come!"

Only after they were in a taxicab, and had given the driver the address of the Jeddison, did the lawyer continue.

"I can reason a little farther, now," he said. "After killing Sid, and getting away clean, I am amazed to find it reported as the death of someone named Alexander Briggan. I can't figure out how or why. At first I am pleased; no suspicion turns my way. But then I think, 'This Briggan, too, knows who the corpse in the telephone booth really was. What game is *he*

playing?' I wonder. He must be in Sid's clothes, so he must have access to Sid's room. Maybe there's something there that points to me, and my crime, or maybe I *think* there is. Two or three days pass, Briggan doesn't show himself, and my curiosity becomes overpowering. I phone several times, get no answer. Then—"

"Then I go around there," finished Aleck, nodding. "I thought of that myself, but I was in no position to dare a meeting."

"We've got to dare it," said the lawyer. "The only way we can ever disclose your identity is to put the finger on the real killer of Sid Salter for the police."

THE cab pulled up in front of the Jeddison, one of the smaller hotels between Sixth and Seventh Avenue, but not small enough for the staff to know each guest by name. The lawyer dropped one of his professional cards on the desk, and after he had palmed a ten-dollar bill into the hand of the clerk, it wasn't hard to get what he wanted.

Upstairs a bellboy accepted a tip and left them in the room they had taken. Amy frowned at the furnishings of the room.

"We're in luck," he said. "Unnecessary luck. Four-fifteen — right next door. It's almost *too* good. Anywhere on this floor would have done, or the next floor either, for that matter."

He opened the door, peered up and down the short corridor, and said over his shoulder, "Let's go." Within ten seconds, using the key from Aleck's pocket, they had entered Four-sixteen, Salter's room.

This room was a twin of the one they had just left, except that the bath and closet were on the left instead of the right. Also, it was obviously occupied. Suits hung in the closet, shirts and underwear filled the drawers, and toilet articles were strewn about the bath. To all of these

things Amy gave a quick but close inspection.

"This bag," he murmured, indicating a full-grain cowhide on the floor of the closet. "Is it locked?"

"It was," said Aleck. "But I used a knife blade on the lock. That's where I found all the phony tickets."

Amy lifted it out to a chair. The lock, forced once, sprang easily under his thumbs. The tickets were still there, the packets forming a solid layer under a handful of soiled shirts.

"It looks as if we're in time," said the lawyer, stuffing back the shirts and carefully returning the bag to precisely the same spot. "If our friend had been here already, he'd have taken those, I should think. Now it remains to be seen if he comes. How's your patience?"

An hour later Amy went back to his own room, ordered dinner sent up, and ate. When he had finished, he relieved Aleck, who repeated the process for himself. When they were again together in Salter's room dusk had deepened to darkness, but they turned on no lights. They conversed in whispers, while the hours crept round the clock.

Amy sat in the straight chair by the desk, Aleck in a low armchair between the bed and the closet door. Their eyes became adjusted to the gloom, which was paled to a woolly gray by indirect reflection from the nearby glare of Seventh Avenue. The continuous grind of traffic came thinly through the closed window, underlying their quiet talk. Tension gathered steadily in the shadows.

The telephone rang, sharp as a knife in the stillness.

Instinctively Aleck started to his feet as if propelled by springs, but the lawyer grabbed his arm.

"No, don't touch it!" he ordered.

Aleck remained on his feet, frozen

tense. The phone rang for what seemed like a long time. When it stopped at last, he tried to relax. The silence was as before.

No, not quite as before, for somewhere else another phone was ringing. The muted *bur-r-r* of the sound came intermittently through intervening walls like a damped, belated echo. Suddenly Amy sprang up.

"Could that be in our room?" he growled, and darted to the door.

When he returned, he was muttering in his throat. "Queer. Nobody knows I'm here—not a soul. Yet that was our phone, all right. It was still ringing when I opened the door, but by the time I got across the room and lifted the receiver it had stopped, and there was no one on the line." Amy resumed his chair. "No more cigarettes," he cautioned. "We're on alert now."

The hum from the distant streets seemed far away, as if it came from another world. Silence lay in the shadowed room like a blanket, smothering their movements, their breathing, their very thoughts. When Amy shifted his weight, and the chair creaked minutely, it was like the crack of a pistol. The small sounds of the elevator, a door closing distantly, were meaningless and vague.

Aleck Briggan forced himself to unclench his fists. Within ten seconds they were taut again. He was hearing something, a sound that he could not identify. A fumbling, a scratching, near at hand, and yet not in the room. How could it be in the room? The door had not opened. He and Amy were alone, the lawyer was absolutely without motion.

**S**LOWLY he put his weight on the balls of his feet, and rose. Amy rose, too. Neither spoke. Aleck heard it again; it came from the direction of the closet. The closet? But they had already looked in the closet. There was nothing there. Nothing

that could conceivably produce a sound of any kind.

He took a step, silent on the carpet. Tingling to his shoulders, he reached out and swung the closet door open. Amy was at his shoulder. For a moment the fumbling sounds were clearer. Then they ceased.

There was nothing in that closet; nothing at all. Aleck knew that. Yet it took all his courage to reach out and swing the hanging clothes aside. He stiffened. He saw something, without knowing what it was he saw, or what it meant. He leaned forward on his toes.

Low down against the end wall of the closet, his eye caught a slender line of light. It was thread-thin, tenuous. Had the lights been on in the room, it would not have been visible. It made a right angle, as if coming past the edges of something like a door. From behind it, now, he heard a faint sound again—a metallic tinkle.

He dropped to his knees, holding the clothing aside with his shoulder. Partly by eye, and partly by sense of feel, he found that a panel was set into the wall here. A wooden panel about twelve by eighteen inches, held by screws at the corners, evidently put there to permit access to plumbing in this wall, beyond which lay the bathroom. Light was leaking past the edges of this panel.

But there was no light in the bathroom, nor anywhere in the suite. There was certainly no source of light within the thickness of the wall itself. It was impossible—yet there it was.

He worked his fingertips under the top edge of the panel. The screws did not hold it tightly, which was why the light found a crevice. He took a grip, and braced one knee.

At that moment he heard Amy, behind him, gasp something about, “the other room!” and dash out the door.

Aleck heaved. The flat panel tore loose and came away. Behind it was a space six or eight inches deep, half filled with piping and sediment traps. The space extended off to his left, apparently connecting with a similar wall space in the adjoining apartment. It was illuminated, feebly, from some source out of sight. In that narrow space, groping horizontally, he saw a thick, sinewy hand.

Reflex action made him grab, just as the hand moved to withdraw. He caught the wrist. Its owner tugged frantically. Aleck got both hands in there, clung with all his strength.

He heard Amy’s voice, but not behind him. It was muffled by intervening walls, and unintelligible. The arm in his grasp writhed and jerked, rasping his forearm against the edge of the opening.

Amy’s voice came louder. “Hang onto him, Aleck!”

Aleck hung on like grim death. The arm twisted in a frenzy. He heard an explosion, near at hand, yet oddly smothered. All the noise in the world seemed to have been poured into the big end of a funnel, while his ear was at the small end. He was panting, sweating.

The wrist was suddenly quiet in his grip.

“All right, come up out of there!” he heard the lawyer order.

“How the devil can I?” another voice muttered.

Amy’s voice raised. “All right, Aleck! Turn him loose!”

Aleck let go, sprang to his feet, and raced through the corridor into Four-fifteen. Here the small lamp had been lighted, and moved from the bedside table to the floor near the open door of the closet. Amy was in the middle of the room, covering a thick-chested man who stood in the closet door with a short-barreled Colt .38.

Aleck stared. "Mike Piel!" he blurted.

Mike glowered, panting through clenched teeth.

"What have you got there, bulging your pockets?" the lawyer demanded sharply, then, as Mike started to lower his arms, "No, never mind! Leave them where they are—some in your pockets, and some in the wall. I want the police to find them, just like that."

Aleck was peering into the closet, where a similar panel had been removed from the wall backing against the bathroom. In under the exposed pipes he saw some flat metal objects.

"The plates!" he exclaimed.

"Sure." Amy nodded. "That's what he was after. He didn't care about tickets, if he could get the plates from which they had been printed. He and Sid probably started this together. But you notice that

out of approximately two thousand dollars Sid had taken from you, there was over eighteen hundred still in Sid's pockets on Tuesday. What's the matter, Mike? Wasn't Sid splitting with you?"

"The dirty heel!" wheezed Mike. His skin, as pale as ivory in contrast with his blue-black hair, was beaded with sweat.

Aleck Briggan picked up the phone and asked for Police Headquarters.

"You can't hang any murder on me!" rasped Mike.

"No?" countered Amy ominously. "This pistol in my hand, which I just took away from you, is a Colt thirty-eight. The bullets in Sid's body came out of a Colt thirty-eight. If a comparison microscope shows that they came out of this barrel, you're going to have some tough explaining to do to a jury."

Mike grew paler than before.