

The movie magnate gasped for breath.
He pounded a fist on the desk.



In Step With Death

By Edward P. Norris

CHAPTER I

BEN CRAGG leaned forward and stared through the rain-streaming taxicab window, scowling. "And I hop back from Florida for this!" he muttered. "Sufferin' cats!"

A sheet of purple lightning lighted lower Broadway and the ripping thunder that followed seemed to shake the taxi.

With an abrupt halt that almost shot his face into the fare meter, the cab stopped, and Cragg sensed rather than saw that they had arrived at his destination. He threw open the door, and a dazzling flash of lightning showed in weird limelight the entrance to the Parker Building.

He leaped out, fumbled in his pocket, took out a crumpled bill which he thrust at the driver with the crisp remark: "There you are, buddy. Keep the change."

He charged across the sidewalk through the heavy rain, plunged blindly through the

revolving doors of the Parker Building into the arms of Oscar, the night elevator man.

"Eh—what—oh, it's Mr. Cragg! Why, you're—you're all wet!"

Ben glared into his face. "Yeah! Maybe I am at that. Me leavin' Florida and a swell crap game on the beach, to say nothing of a barrel of liquor, just to come back and work. I'm nuts!"

In the elevator he demanded: "What's eating the boss, Oscar? He sent six wires. For the love o' Pete, if I hadn't wired back that I'd take the night plane, he'd still be sending 'em."

Oscar stopped the car at the tenth floor and said as he rolled the door back: "Mr. Alsop went out about half an hour ago. He looked mad. I heard him mumbling something about that there blankety-blank Ben Cragg."

Ben stepped into the corridor, turned left. He surveyed his damp appearance as he moved along, and scowled at it. He was fussy about his clothes. His light gray suit had been

immaculate a few hours ago. It looked second-hand now.

He stopped before a door whose frosted glass panel bore the name "Aaron Alsop" in gilt letters. So the boss was out? He fished in his pocket for the key, while his other hand tried the door handle. His eyebrows raised as the door opened; it wasn't locked.

He walked slowly in, looked around the medium sized office, luxurious and very modern. Nobody sat at the glittering desk, nobody occupied any of the capacious leather chairs. The office was empty.

Ben Cragg frowned as he considered that Aaron Alsop, reckoned one of the shrewdest of the movie magnates, had gone out and left his office unlocked.

"Gosh, he must have been steamed up," muttered Cragg as he shrugged his shoulders and moved casually toward the desk. His eye caught the cigar box there. Cragg had one weakness besides liquor—his boss' fat cigars. He reached toward the cigar box.

With fingers on the lid, he paused. He thought he heard a step out in the corridor. It was not a deliberate step as of a person walking openly, but more like a hurried shuffle.

Ben's blue eyes lost a little of their liquor shine. He spun around and took long steps to the door. He heard the shuffle again, but when he got to the door and stared up and down the corridor, he saw nobody. Puzzled and scowling, he told himself he hadn't drunk enough to get that way.

Half a minute he stood there and couldn't shake the suspicion off. Opposite the office were the stairs that ran to the next floor. They brought him an idea. He gave another look up and down the corridor and went up the stone stairs. Around the crook he stopped and sat down. While he was pretty well shielded himself, he could clearly see the office door. If that prowler came back—

Three minutes went by. Except for rumbling thunder from without, Ben heard

nothing. He began to get annoyed with himself. Booze and the dice had got his nerves rattling, he told himself. His damp clothing didn't help his feelings.

Then came a sound that he hadn't been looking for—the slam of the elevator door. Then footsteps down the corridor, steady, even steps. He frowned. Who was this? It couldn't be the prowler. It wasn't, on the other hand, Aaron Alsop's walk.

Through the iron supports of the stairs, he saw a man stop outside the office. As far as Ben could see, he was fairly well dressed and there was nothing furtive about his manner. He raised his hand to knock on the door, but then apparently his glimpse of the interior showed him that it was empty. With studied assurance, the man walked inside.

"Well, of all the hard neck!" grunted Ben, his eyes narrowed. "Does he take our office for a comfort station?"

He pulled himself to his feet, shook his damp clothing to get it a bit more comfortable and commenced to descend the stairs. I'll tell that egg something!"

He got to the crook of the stairs and was about to put foot on the straight flight when it happened. There was vivid light, a roar that almost burst his eardrums, a violent blast of air that hurtled his six feet against the wall and jolted every bone in his body. For seconds he felt that the floor was trying to throw him, and it was a while before he discovered he was on his hands and knees.

Dazed, ears ringing, he picked himself up. Dust was everywhere. He stared through it toward where he judged the office should be. It was a few moments before he realized that the office door was screened by clouds of bluish smoke in the passage, that those clouds were issuing from the office. The thought came to him that a thunderbolt had struck the office.

HE headed into the smoke, stumbled through the office door. He cursed as he

saw little rivulets of flame running along the carpet. He floundered up and down and stamped them out.

Then, with streaming eyes and a tight feeling around his heart, he stooped to examine an inert figure lying twistedly between desk and shattered window.

A couple of moments' examination was enough. The liquor flash left Ben's face and left it its normal pale appearance. The man he had seen walk into the office was now dead.

He was not a pretty sight. There was little that was recognizable about his blackened features. Burnt flesh crept sickeningly in Ben's nostrils. The clothing had been shredded almost to strips and parts still smoldered.

Suddenly a queer look came to Ben's eyes as they fastened upon something half embedded in the man's stomach. It appeared to be a fragment of wood. He dashed the tears from his smarting eyes. With a disregard for police rules, he gently removed the fragment of wood from the corpse.

A savage look came to his eyes. Blackened and burnt as the wood was, he recognized it as part of a cigar box. And embedded in it was a small piece of metal; it might have been part of a small mechanism.

Ben's eyes traveled slowly over the desk, absorbed its split and scorched surface. Not an object remained on the desk. Cragg knew why. Because the bomb that had made this office its object of death and destruction had been hidden in Aaron Alsop's cigar box; the box toward which he had stretched his hand not many minutes ago!

A savage peal of thunder came through the shattered window. It brought to Ben the realization that so far there was no evidence of an alarm. Had the explosion been mistaken for part of the storm?

The thought that there might be no immediate interruption sent him to one knee beside the victim of the blast. He was curious to know who it was that had perhaps saved

him from sudden death. Why had he come visiting Aaron Alsop's downtown private office at this late hour?

The net result of his unpleasant investigation was finding cigarettes, matches, handkerchief, money of little consequence, a bunch of keys and a pair of black dice. The last alone awoke a spark of interest in Cragg. The dice were unusual, to say the least. The dots were not the regular circles of white on the black; they were tiny death's-heads, skulls.

As Ben turned the dice over in his palm, each one of those skulls seemed to have its own fiendish grin for him. He scowled, jiggled them uncertainly, stared from them to the burned countenance of the dead man.

A hard light made his eyes look like glaciers. "Yeah," he muttered, "these bones are unusual. Maybe someone'll remember having seen them before."

He started as he heard the elevator door slam down the corridor. Quickly he dropped the dice into his pocket, returned the rest of the corpse's belongings. He stepped to the door, and as he did so, he recognized the short, hurried steps that were coming along the corridor.

A paunchy man in a herringbone suit and a broad brimmed hat was coming up. He was swinging a dripping umbrella viciously. When he caught sight of Cragg lounging out from the office, the scowl on his crabby features deepened.

"So," he said furiously, "you're here!" He bounced his umbrella before Ben and glared. "Why didn't you go to the uptown office?"

Ben's eyebrows moved. "Because I usually see you here, boss."

"Then why did you phone that you'd be at the uptown office instead? Don't get that dumb look on your face. I'm not in the mood for wisecracks. Answer me."

Aaron Alsop, movie magnate, did not wait for an answer, however. He made to push past Ben to the office, the door of which was open.

"Don't go in there, boss." Ben grabbed his

arm and halted him.

“What’s that?” snarled Aaron Alsop. “I’m sick of your monkey business, Cragg. I’ve got to get these damned wet shoes off.”

His brown eyes suddenly narrowed. “Say, what’s the queer smell of smoke around here? You’ve been—” He wrenched free from Ben, stumbling as far as the office door.

Ben stood and eyed his boss. He saw the startling change that came over the crabby face; saw the horror that leaped into the brown eyes.

Aaron Alsop shivered. His bulging eyes were focused on the still figure that was on the floor of his office. The umbrella slipped from his fingers, crashed unheeded to the corridor floor. A peal of thunder vibrated the building and he gave a violent start.

“You—killed him?” he whispered, as he turned to Ben. “Who—what did he do?”

Ben lounged forward, stared bleakly inside. He said calmly: “This guy was going to help himself to one of your cigars, boss.”

The remark shook Aaron Alsop back to his usual crabby self. His face purpled, a couple of muscles vibrated in his jaws. He snarled: “Damn you, Cragg, can’t you ever be serious? My God, right now, just when I need—”

“And the cigar box blew up,” finished Ben evenly.

“What—what—” The movie magnate’s eyes were drawn back to the office. This time he absorbed those details that told him that something more violent than a mere cartridge had exploded in his office. He noticed his blackened, ruined desk, its bareness; the shattered window, the burnt carpet.

Suddenly a plaintive sound came from somewhere behind the desk. Aaron Alsop started and involuntarily clutched at Ben’s arm. Then he realized that it was from the telephone that had been hurtled from the desk. The operator’s signal was coming through.

“Better call the cops,” Ben suggested.

Aaron Alsop stepped gingerly inside, scowling around at the wreck, at the corpse.

He retrieved the phone from the floor, stared blankly for a moment at its shorn mouthpiece, then snapped into what was left of it: “Get me the police.”

While he waited, Ben satisfied his curiosity as to the happenings as he knew them. He didn’t mention to his boss that he had searched the body and possessed himself of a pair of dice. Aaron Alsop’s face worked queerly.

“My God, then it was meant for me! Who could have—” He broke off to talk to the police.

When he hung up, Cragg said: “Maybe you can tell me now the reason for those six wires busting in on my vacation. Was it this?” He indicated the corpse.

Alsop’s hands were clenching and unclenching rapidly. His eyes didn’t seem to know where to rest in that ruin of what had been a sumptuous office.

“Maybe,” he muttered, “maybe. It’s been bombs all along. It looks like it’s getting closer to—I can’t tell you about it here. The cops’ll be along soon. We’ll have to leave them with this mess. I’ll tell you up at the other office. But it’s bad stuff, believe me. We’re up against killers, Cragg!”

CHAPTER II

AN hour later, Aaron Alsop and Ben Cragg were in the privacy of the movie magnate’s office in the Monarch Building. The mysterious bombing of the office was in the hands of the police. Cragg had given his abbreviated account. And he had heard with some surprise Aaron Alsop declare that the bombing was probably the handiwork of the same maniacs who had been attacking his theatres.

Now Ben sat on the edge of the desk and said: “Spill the works, boss.”

Aaron Alsop, putting a match that trembled slightly to a cigar, growled: “You’ve been so busy holiday-making you probably

haven't heard that four of my theatres have been bombed in the last couple of weeks."

Cragg said: "That still leaves you sixty-seven, boss." But a new look had come to his pale face. "Anybody killed?"

"Two cashiers got their last payoff," gritted Alsop. "And—Winterfern."

"Winterfern?" said Cragg softly, and his long fingers moved restlessly.

"Yes. I had him trailing this mob of blackmailers and killers. They got him. Winterfern was a friend of yours, wasn't he, Cragg?"

Cragg didn't answer, unless his bleak look could be said to be the answer.

Alsop went on harshly: "I've got Dave Kelborn on the job now. I'm not satisfied with him. He's a lot of talk and that's about all. I should have sent for you long ago, Cragg. You're the only man can handle it."

Aaron Alsop paused, his crabby features slightly perspiring. His brown eyes were intent upon his star field man, the man who had for ten years been the biggest factor in handling the troubles that had inevitably beset the millionaire movie chain owner.

These two, man and boss, invariably dueled with words—Aaron Alsop irritable and nagging, Cragg kidding and wisecracking. The movie magnate called Cragg everything under the sun. But no man had ever penetrated beneath the crabby surface as had the slickly dressed, irresponsible, fight-loving Cragg. And Aaron Alsop trusted him. The rope he gave him was the surest proof of it.

Cragg cut into the pause with the soft comment: "You've told me a hell of a lot so far. You said something about blackmail."

Alsop's plump figure seemed to shrivel slightly in the swivel chair. His brown eyes darted from Ben to his cigar. He coughed twice. He said harshly:

"Listen, Cragg. You've known me twenty years. Since you were a kid. Everything's been on the level between us. I knew all about you. You—well, you knew all about me,

except this one thing I'm going to tell you now."

Alsop puffed furiously. With a savage gesture, he waved the smoke clouds aside and stared straight at Ben.

"Twenty-five years ago I was a jail bird. I did a three years stretch for forgery. I don't claim that I was innocent."

There was a silence of about six seconds. To both of them it seemed like six years. Ben could only guess what it cost Aaron Alsop to confess this black smirch upon his character, but he conquered his stunned surprise quickly. An artist at covering his emotions, he leaned across the desk and helped himself to a handful of cigars from the box. He bit the end off, thrust the rest into his pocket.

"So some rats have smelled it out?" he said calmly. "I always did enjoy rat catching, boss." He struck a match and absorbed himself in lighting his cigar.

Aaron Alsop's brown eyes blinked once; he cleared his throat "It's a man by the name of Joe 'Spider' Gatty and his mob who are at the bottom of it. He somehow got hold of papers that identify me as the man who—who served that jail sentence twenty-five years ago. Three weeks ago he blew in here and told me about them. His price was one hundred grand. That, or he'd let the world know that Aaron Alsop, the country's biggest theatre owner, was a jailbird.

"I was so mad at the time that I called his bluff. I told him to get to hell out and tell anybody he liked. He got nasty about that. I was in a sweat when he went, but I thought he'd come back with a more reasonable offer."

Aaron Alsop crushed his ruined cigar into an onyx ash tray on the desk. His brown eyes were glittering.

"That same night the box office and vestibule of the Eighth Avenue theatre were wrecked by a bomb. The next day I learned that it was Gatty who had called my bluff. He dared me to tell the police. On top of that he

told me the rake-off was raised to two hundred grand. Two hundred thousand dollars! He said they would bomb a theatre every other night until I came across.

“And I can’t call in the cops.” Aaron Alsop’s whole body seemed to sag. “I can’t have it shouted across the country that the mighty Aaron Alsop was once a low-down forger and sweated in prison for it. I can’t do it! Listen, Cragg. I’d pay this money, yes, the two hundred grand. But I’ve a hunch it won’t stop at that. They’ll unreel me to the spindle. They’ll bleed me until I’m forced out of business.”

The movie magnate gasped for breath. He pounded a fist on the desk.

“I’m banking everything on you, Cragg. You’ve got to get those papers! You’ve got to shut those crooks up. How? My God, I don’t know. But it’s got to be done!”

Ben wreathed a perfect smoke ring and said through it: “You said you have Dave Kelborn working on it. He’s one of your slickest detectives.”

“I want results,” ground out the movie magnate. “Kelborn’s been on the job a week. There’ve been two bombings during that week. These killers are getting tough. You saw tonight—at my other office. That bomb in the cigar was meant for me.”

Ben said slowly: “I’m not so sure of that. You remember the phone call that brought you up to this office—you thought it was from me? Whoever called wanted you out of the way to set the hot stuff for—well, for whoever was likely to show up there at seven o’clock.”

“That—was you,” muttered Aaron Alsop, looking very queer. “You said in your wire you’d be there at seven. My God, it’s true enough that whenever you come into my office you poke your fingers into my cigars! Then, who—”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” said Ben calmly. “It was somebody who knows a bit about me, I should say. He also knew that I was due at your downtown office at seven

tonight. As a matter of fact, I did hear somebody snooping outside in the corridor. I was laying for him when this strange bird walked in. Whoever this stranger was, he sure spoiled the plans of our unknown friend.”

“It almost seems,” frowned Aaron Alsop, “that this crook, Spider Gatty, may have got wind of your coming in on this job. But he doesn’t know you, so that wouldn’t worry him. It might be somebody in the firm that’s in it some way, somebody who could find out that you were coming up from Florida tonight. Somebody who doesn’t want you to bust this racket wide open. Cragg, it’s a hundred grand for you the moment you lay those papers in my hands!”

A TELEPHONE by Ben’s hip whirred and he scooped it up. He rolled the cigar to a corner of his mouth, said: “Hullo.”

A feminine voice that sounded shrill and lispy said: “Is this Mr. Alsop?”

“Talking,” said Ben smoothly, blandly regarding Aaron Alsop whose ears had pricked up.

The next moment Ben’s cigar fell from his parted lips. The feminine voice came hurtling at him laden with invective and fury.

“You dirty, rotten murderer!” the woman screamed. “I’ll get you for what you did tonight! You think because you’ve got millions you can get away with your—rough stuff! You—louse! If it takes me to my dying day, I’ll—”

Ben lost the ensuing enflamed words, for Aaron Alsop lurched over the desk with a strangled: “What in hell am I hearing?”

Ben removed the tingling receiver from his ear while he stooped and recovered his cigar from the rug. Taking a puff, he said into the mouthpiece: “If you would elucidate, madam—”

There was an explosive sound, then a short silence during which Ben could hear the woman’s hard breathing.

She said: “You know damned well what

I'm talking about. You killed Steve Gold about two hours ago in your office. I just got it from the police. Steve was my man, you rat!"

"The police told you that? I killed him?"

"They said something about a bomb exploding in your office and killing him. I know different. You killed him, Alsop!"

"Is the woman mad?" snarled the theatre king who was listening intently.

Ben's brow was furrowed. He was thinking swiftly that contacting this woman might result in his finding out who it was had planted that bomb; who had laid that certain death for him, Ben Cragg.

"Listen, ma'am," he said smoothly. "This thing can easily be explained. If you'll let me know where you are, I'll send my man along; he was on the spot when it happened—" Ben grinned a crooked grin. "He can tell you all about it. Believe me, we were intended to be the victims, not Steve Gold. If you'll say the word, he'll be along in ten minutes."

There was a short pause, then begrudgingly and with undisguised suspicion in her voice, the woman said: "I'm at 404 Eleventh Avenue, second floor."

Ben repeated the address and scrawled it down. "Who should he ask for?"

"Nobody. I'm the only one here. The name's Elsie Clinton, in case you don't know it. You better be snappy with that alibi of yours. I'll be waiting."

"Right away," said Ben, and hung up when he heard the phone go dead.

Aaron Alsop snorted. "What the hell next? I don't like it, Cragg. Do you suppose she honestly thinks I killed her man?"

"Elsie Clinton," repeated Cragg, brow furrowed. "Never heard the name. She sounded like—well, like she could squawk her piece to anyone, tough as they come. But you know, boss—" he slipped from the edge of the desk and knocked cigar ash from his pants—"if she's playing for a phony deal, she's right out of luck. I'll get along there."

"Cragg," said Alsop, rising in a hurry and

halting Cragg's move to the door, "I meant that offer for those—those blackmail papers. You'll get busy on it right away?"

"What headway has Dave Kelborn been making on it?"

"Not a thing that I know of," growled the movie magnate.

"Kelborn's a smart detective," said Ben.

The movie king stared hard, said gruffly: "That's the second time you've said that tonight. The only smart thing he's done is to tell me not to pay the dough yet. And I'm not so sure that that was very smart—for me. This Joe Gatty wasn't blowing off when he said I'd pay heavy for stalling. A Bronx theatre got bombed last night, the second this week. If I don't send this damned gangster the money before tomorrow night, another one goes, according to him. God! Whichever way I go, it looks like ruin!"

"You got this Joe Gatty's address?"

Aaron Alsop pulled open a drawer in his desk and brought out a slip of paper. Ben took it and glanced at it. His eyelids drooped; he knew his New York.

"On West 34th Street, huh? This number is about five minutes' walk from Elsie Clinton's hangout. Hmm, maybe I can kill two birds with one stone. Be seeing you, boss."

Ben crunched his hat on and sauntered from the office. He left Alsop with open mouth and a slightly startled expression. The movie magnate knew that Cragg's casual statement that he'd drop in and see Spider Gatty was no bluff and no boast.

CRAGG lay back against the cushions of a taxi as it hissed through drizzling rain. From his expression as he puffed at his shortened cigar, one would not guess that he was wrestling with a problem.

He was trying to place Spider Gatty. He knew most of the real crooks in the city. Was this bombing-blackmailing stunt out of his own head, or was Spider just a tool for others? There was a boldness about the whole thing

that suggested the latter theory.

Who was this Steve Gold, and his woman, Elsie Clinton? Were they in on the racket? It didn't sound reasonable, since Gold had walked into a trap obviously set for Ben.

Ben gave it up for the moment, hurled his cigar through the window. One hand fingered the curious dice in his pocket, while the other arranged a fiat, black automatic under his arm. It was always well to be prepared to do business.

Soon he was paying off the taxi outside a house two doors from the one he sought on Eleventh Avenue. The taxi hurried off and Ben turned his attention to Number 404. It was a two story affair, looking rather dingy and disreputable in the drizzly night. There was no light in the downstairs hall, but there was a dim reflection from one upstairs somewhere. The house next door bore a "Rooms to Rent" sign.

Ben turned-up his coat collar against the rain and suddenly felt very dry in the throat. He had to snatch a quick drink somewhere.

A big, red Neon light sign, BEER, hit him in the eye right across Eleventh. With an inward promise to take one—maybe two swift ones, he jogged across the street. He dived through old-fashioned swing doors and found himself with his foot on the brass rail.

"Gimme a whiskey sour—not too much on the sour. Better make it two while you're about it." He helped himself to a pickle. The potbellied barkeep gaped, nodded, and Ben looked around.

There were a half dozen men at the bar, a young girl and a fellow at a table. The man nearest Ben seemed to be struggling with a full cargo. Ben told himself that the guy was lucky the bar was in front of him. He watched the drunk hiccough through the dregs of his beer, let the glass sag down and then himself after it.

The bartender arrived with the two whiskies sour. Ben put down a dollar bill and scooped one up. The barkeep patted the drunk

on the shoulder.

"Better take him out, buddy. Go on home and sleep it off. You can get a room right across the street," he pointed. "See that sign, 'Rooms for Rent?'"

The drunk nodded and Ben grinned. With a mumbled word, the man reeled from the bar and through the swing doors out into the drizzly night.

"Without a word of a lie," the barkeep told them, "that guy ain't had more'n seven, eight beers. He didn't oughter get like that." He commenced to polish glasses and asked Ben: "How's it taste?"

Ben squinted at the last quarter of the second drink and said cheerfully: "It's in a glass—I mean class of its own. Got a secret formula?"

"Well, now," began the barkeep, flashing his gold teeth—and then his fingers broke the glass he was polishing. He stiffened.

Ben coughed on the last of his drink, startled more than the bartender, perhaps, by the two staccato barks that had come above the spattering rain. His blue eyes were suddenly expressionless as he stared into the round eyes of the bartender.

For ten seconds they looked at each other. One of the customers laughed. It seemed to break the tension that had to a certain extent held everybody.

The barkeep muttered with a sheepish grin: "It scared me at first. Thought they were shots. Y'know, there's too many holdups in places like mine. Reckon it must be an automobile." He started to unwrap the broken glass from his cloth.

Ben said: "Yeah, I guess you ought to know." He placed his glass down, said good-night and moved out.

The moment his feet hit the rain splattered sidewalk, his eyes darted searchingly to the other side of Eleventh Avenue. The houses across there looked dark, deserted. Ben wasn't satisfied. Notwithstanding the opinion of those in the beer garden, he knew that those sounds

were gun shots, revolver shots. He'd heard them too often to confuse them with automobile backfiring. Who had fired those shots? Whom had they been fired at?

There wasn't a soul on the avenue as far as he could see. It was too dark to be able to distinguish anything in the entrance of number 404. But Ben had a positive feeling that those two shots had been fired in that house.

HE turned right and walked until he was clear of the light thrown by the saloon. Then he slipped swiftly across the road and came back to 404. With a hand hovering close to his armpit, he stepped into the almost dark hallway.

He took about two steps, that was all. There was enough of that dim light from upstairs to show him a dark huddle at the foot of the stairs. A man lay there, in a curiously abandoned attitude. And Cragg, getting the sharp tang of burnt cordite in the stuffy hall, knew that the man was dead.

His ears strained for sound and got none. After a short wrestle as to whether he should leave the job for the police or whether he should try to satisfy his strong curiosity, he tiptoed along the hall.

The man's face was turned up. Bending to get a closer look, Ben swore in surprise. The man was the drunk who had left the saloon five minutes ago! He must have entered the wrong house. Had he got what was meant for Cragg?

Cragg's blood tingled fast through his veins as he made a closer examination. The unfortunate drunk was dead, right enough. A bullet through the heart, another through the throat. The woman, damn her, had made very sure! Cragg wouldn't have had any chance to do any explaining.

"Damn!" breathed Ben, straightening up. In his hand now was the flat, black automatic. "A devil in short pants!"

He stared up the stairs. He told himself that a search would be a waste of energy, but

he shrugged and started up them. Two at a time he took them, stepping on the sides to avoid squeaks.

On the landing he made the surprising discovery that the feeble light was thrown by an oil lamp. It hung in the passage in a position to throw light on the foot of the stairs. The house was untenanted, Ben felt, and a short search confirmed this. There was no furniture of any kind in the rooms. There was loads of dust.

In one of the rooms a window was open. Cragg scowled out into the night. The woman's action had been nothing short of crazed. She had shot a man, supposedly an envoy of the movie magnate, upon no sane grounds whatever. She hadn't been too crazy to make a getaway though, he reflected.

He returned down the stairs, stepped over the body. In the doorway he reholstered his automatic, drew a deep breath of moist; cool air, then stepped out swiftly in the direction of Thirty-fourth Street.

During the short walk, his brain had plenty to work on. It drummed in his head that he had a narrow escape from death for the second time that evening. Then swiftly the thought came that perhaps this second happening had been no crazed action. Perhaps the fact had been known that it would be he who would come to the house! Perhaps those bullets had been intended for Ben Cragg and nobody else!

Warming to that notion, who, Ben asked himself, was it that was so anxious to have him cold in a hurry? And why?

He entered a cigar store on Thirty-fourth and stepped into a telephone booth. He called police headquarters, in a quiet voice told them: "A man plugged at 404 Eleventh Avenue. He's dead. No lilies by request, I should say." He hung up and left the booth.

Out on the street, he turned west. He looked at the scrap of paper he had got from Aaron Alsop, assured himself that Spider Gatty's place was in the block that ended in the docks.

He found the house, a red brick affair that was nothing to boast about, wedged in between a garage and a furniture warehouse. A trolley clattered past on its way to the ferries, and Ben took advantage of the noise to slip into the entrance and try the door. It was locked. He saw a mailbox with the name "Archibald Fitzimmons" on it. A newspaper was sticking out of the mailbox.

"With apologies, Archibald," Ben muttered, and brought out a flat leather case from an inside pocket.

Potential burglar that he was, Ben was never without this assortment of spidery skeleton keys. He proceeded to try them, one at a time, in the shiny brass lock. He was anticipating victory when the house door whipped open and an unshaven jaw stuck into his face. A burly young fellow with a bluish face growled in an ugly tone: "You looking for something, buddy?"

CHAPTER III

"I'VE got a special delivery for a Mr. Fitzimmons," said Cragg genially.

He moved into the doorway and pushed a flat paper into the young fellow's right arm. Involuntarily the man brought his right fist from his coat pocket where it had been bulging prominently and took the paper. It was a copy of the *Daily Toiler* which Ben had taken from the mailbox.

The hood snarled: "What the hell?" and made a move back to his right coat pocket. His hand found Ben's there. Ben's hand came up with a heavy revolver in a motion that ripped the pocket.

"You wouldn't play rough with me, would you?" reproached Cragg. His pale face had that genial smile, his blue eyes their innocent sparkle. "Be a good fellow, now; tell me where I'll find Spider Gatty."

"You go to hell!" snarled the tough, his narrowed eyes blazing.

"Nice boy, nice boy," said Ben, after he

had assured himself that the hoodlum carried no further weapons. "Maybe I'll find him, anyhow."

Giving the young hood a shove against the wall, Ben went on to a flight of stairs. He had seen the fellow's eyes dart momentarily in their direction.

At the top of the stairs, he walked down a carpeted passage. Passing two doors, he stopped at one from beneath which came a streak of light, and voices.

He regarded the door, tried the handle, followed as the door obligingly moved in to his shove.

The next moment Ben froze to a standstill. It was not that the room he was in surprised him; it was just a small, ordinary living room. It was because he felt something very hard jar painfully into his ribs and he didn't need informing that it was a gun.

A voice said over his shoulder, and it sounded deadly: "You think you're some gate crasher, huh? Now tell us who y'are an' what you want before you get what's coming!"

Cragg's head turned slowly. He looked into a dark face, green eyes. The face was scarred by a livid mark that reeled drunkenly across the brow. The eyes looked capable of carrying out the voiced threat without compunction. Below them was a thin mustache, a mouth that twitched continuously at one corner. The rest of the speaker's figure was clad in a chocolate brown suit that fitted like a kid glove.

Cragg said pleasantly: "I guess you're Archibald Fitzimmons, aren't you, Mr. Gatty? Honored to meet you, I'm sure." As he spoke, he noticed that another man had sidled into view and was moving to a chair beside a table where liquor and glasses were standing.

The dark, scarred face close to Ben's showed no change of expression. Perhaps the green eyes grew a trifle more venomous. The gun jammed more painfully into Cragg's ribs while words trickled softly from the cruel mouth.

“So you’re a wisecracking dick, eh?”

Cragg stared into the scarred face and found it as cold as any reptile’s. He sensed more than felt that the man’s fingers were squeezing the trigger of his gun. The blood rippled fast through his veins while his face remained pale and unconcerned; his blue eyes stared into the green ones as he said genially:

“For goshsakes, save the lead, pal! Don’t you know there’s gonna be another war? Besides, you’ll only have five bullets left; nine if it’s an automatic. On top of that,” he finished airily, “Sergeant Maloney is waiting for me outside and does he get mad when he hears shots!” Cragg gambled his life on a thread then.

Joe “Spider” Gatty’s thin mouth twitched furiously. “I don’t know whether you’re extra smart or just plain batty,” he finally spat out. But I’ll tell you this. If Sergeant Maloney or any other flatty is outside, he won’t hear a thing. We know that—from experience.” The glittering eyes that showed signs of recent hops or potent liquors were giving a warning. “Take it—grifter!”

There was a flash, a roar that shook the room, a sharp oath. Spider fell back a step. Ben did the same. Spider clutched a bleeding wrist while Cragg steadied a heavy revolver and fanned smoke away.

The man at the table had leaped to his feet. He sat down sullenly; the gun in Ben’s hand, the look in Ben’s blue eyes, were not cheering. He kept his hands on the table.

Ben said: “I had a hunch things’d be sociable. Get those mitts about half an inch higher, Spider. You only got nicked.” He lunged back with his foot and crashed the door to, then kicked Spider’s gun under the radio.

Spider was livid, his eyes seething with murderous rage. “I should have given it to you right off,” he snarled.

“Sure you should,” nodded Cragg. “But when a guy doesn’t look scared, it gets you killers all rattled.”

“Cut the chatter,” growled Spider.

“What’n hell d’you want?”

“First, I want to know why you’re so anxious to rub me out. I can get as curious as a woman about little things like that.”

“You crashed in here, didn’t you? What for? I don’t stand for strangers snooping into my joint. I got my own business here—”

“Yeah,” Cragg sniffed. “The pineapple business. You can’t kill the stink of it. It’s here you make the bombs that have been wrecking Aaron Alsop’s theatres. The police’ll be tickled to get an invitation up here, Spider.”

“You’re talking through your hat!” The killer’s eyes were expressionless.

“You know what I’m talking about, Spider,” Ben went on. “I’m talking about the bomb that was planted in Aaron Alsop’s office this evening and was meant for me. Who put you up to do that job and why?”

SPIDER frowned, stared hard at Cragg. Then a gleam came to the green eyes; an ugly, crooked grin distorted his face. He looked at Cragg with a new interest.

“You don’t say? A bomb? It was meant for you?” A short, ugly laugh was followed by a vindictive growl, uttered as though to himself: “The damned punk, why’d he bungle the job?” His head swung toward the man sitting at the table with hands half raised. “You heard that, Himey?”

Himey writhed sulkily in his chair and grunted: “I said from the first we didn’t have to take no partners.”

Cragg said: “You’ve only got to tell me who he is. I’ll dissolve the partnership without benefit of attorney.”

Spider looked at him with narrowed eyes. “You would, eh? Listen, you movie dick, I don’t figure you’ll get far enough to dissolve nothing. Nobody did this to the Spider and got away with it!” He lifted his bleeding hand a few inches nearer Cragg.

Cragg’s blue eyes lost their last trace of humor. He said: “Since you know who I am,

we can get down to tacks, Spider. I want those papers of Aaron Alsop's. The ones you claim are worth two hundred grand to him. Your blackmail racket is through, get that?"

Spider snarled: "You can go to hell!"

"That's an idea!" Cragg's tone was cold. "That's exactly where you're going in thirty seconds if you don't produce." With great deliberateness, never removing his eyes from Gatty, his left hand produced a watch from his vest pocket. The right hand made itself comfortable around the gun.

Ben commenced emotionlessly: "One—two—three—"

"Count a bit faster," sneered Spider. "I'm waiting."

"Five—six—"

"A punk like you wouldn't have the nerve to croak anybody."

"Seven—eight—nine—"

"You'd be paralyzed thinkin' of the hot chair," snarled Spider.

"Ten—eleven—" went on Cragg steadily, and except for a flickering glance at the frozen man at the table, his gaze did not leave Spider and his watch. "You remember you said a shot in here wouldn't be heard in the street. That makes me feel good. Seventeen—eighteen—nineteen—"

"Cut out the bluff," growled Spider, his eyes burning at Cragg. His hands were twitching now.

Cragg's counting finished very softly. "Twenty-eight—twenty-nine—thirty."

The watch in his hand fell down. The blue eyes were bleak; they seemed to look through Spider. The unshaded, overhead lights produced a glint on the revolver as it moved. Cragg leaned forward; there was a click; then a scream from Spider Gatty, a scream of fear.

"Don't, don't! I'll talk. Hold it—damn you!"

Cragg sighed. "You just spoke in time. I nearly let you have it." His expression hinted that he had missed a pleasure. "Make it snappy. Dig up those papers of Aaron

Alsop's."

He returned the watch to his pocket. As it disappeared, there was again that soft click, the same click that had broken Spider's nerve. It was produced by Ben's thumbnail on the engraved back of the watch case.

"I ain't got the papers," snarled Spider, brushing the back of his bleeding hand across his sweating brow. "I've never seen them. Now you can get to hell out of here!"

Cragg gave a ghostly grin. He derived enjoyment from this spectacle of a mobster who had just had the fright of his life and hadn't got over it yet. He half believed Spider but he said sharply:

"You louse-bound liar. I'll beat the daylight out of you if you don't come clean."

He took a step closer to the blackmailer. Spider showed gold-capped teeth and moved back. He threw a furious look at his companion who sat stonelike at the table. Himey had fresh memories of Cragg's slick gunplay; he shrugged.

Spider hissed at Cragg: "I tell you that's on the level. Ask Himey. We ain't got the papers. We only had orders to make Alsop come across, bomb his theatre joints if he didn't."

The man at the table growled: "That's right."

"What's the name of the guy who has them?" snapped Cragg. "Spit it out fast"

"It ain't a man," scowled Spider. "It's a woman."

Cragg's eyes widened a trifle. He stared hard at the crook. Mostly because of the unexpectedness of the statement, he was inclined to believe it. Fresh in his mind was the voice of the woman who had phoned Alsop's office; the woman who had lain in wait to kill a man in cold blood. Was she the woman?

"What's her name? Where does she live?"

Spider licked his lips, hesitated, weighing the chances of a swift move to the gun under his armpit. Something about the crystal blue

eyes and pale face dampened his murderous thoughts. He said through his teeth: “ ’Bout six blocks from here. On Ninth. Number—”

His words trailed off. A subtle change came to his scarred face, a change picked up immediately by Cragg. Instinct warned Cragg that the door behind him had quietly opened. He stepped swiftly sideways, gun slewing with him, to face a man who stood in the doorway.

THE man had no expression whatever on his heavy face; it was the mask of a gambler, its smooth surface broken only by two deep lines from nose to mouth. He equaled Cragg’s six feet, but was heavier built. Most people would have guessed that he was a detective; he had that appearance. They might have added, out of regard for the wide, cruel mouth, that they wouldn’t care to become an object of one of his manhunts.

Cragg said coolly: “You shouldn’t creep in so quietly, Kelborn. I almost perforated your nice, black tie.”

The cold, gray eyes stared at him. For a man so burly, his voice was very soft.

“Fortunately—or otherwise, you didn’t, Cragg.”

The newcomer transferred his gaze to the other two in the room. Without change of the inflexion of his voice, he said: “Apparently, my friend, you are striving to earn the huge salary that Aaron Alsop pays you. You have got the papers?”

Cragg sensed rather than distinguished the sarcasm. He sensed even stronger the hidden hatred which he had always suspected Dave Kelborn had for him. Cragg knew Kelborn to be a smart detective, smarter than any in Aaron Alsop’s organization. For all that, there had been times when the movie magnate had chosen the younger Cragg rather than Kelborn to clean up a particularly tough assignment. Cragg’s successes hadn’t been sweet ointment to Kelborn’s feelings.

“Got the papers?” Ben laughed. “Not yet,

Kelborn, but it won’t be long now. I know who’s got them.”

Ben thought Kelborn’s eyes grew harder as they transferred to Spider Gatty. He hadn’t time to think much about it.

Spider snarled: “Like hell you do! You didn’t get a damn word out of me, you punk!”

“Quite right. I’m full of apologies,” drawled Ben. “I should have said I’m just on the point of finding out. By the way, Kelborn, what brought you up?”

Cragg was standing in a position that enabled him to keep a watchful eye on Spider and Himey and at the same time face his companion detective.

Dave Kelborn said slowly: “Aaron Alsop put me on this job, didn’t he?”

Ben nodded, his gaze traveling over Kelborn. “So he tells me.”

“Up to the present I’ve had no orders calling me off. Furthermore, I’ve had no intimation that a supervisor was to be put on the job to take my reports.”

“The supervisor might want to know,” said Cragg softly, “where you got all that thick dust on your clothes. You’ve only half brushed it off. Been looking around empty houses?”

For an instant the masklike face of Kelborn twitched, a glint came to the cold gray eyes. It was two or three moments before he said harshly:

“If you’re through here, I’ll take a turn. I’ll let you know if I can’t handle this job. I told Alsop I’d get his papers inside a week.”

Ben said mildly: “I promised the boss I’d get them within forty-eight hours, Kelborn. It means I’ve got to hustle. I’m taking these lads down to the station to have them booked. Get your hats, boys.”

“Say, where do you get that stuff?” It was a furious snarl from Spider. “You’re not getting me out here!”

Ben was less interested in Spider’s outcry than he was in Kelborn’s expression. The big detective looked as though he had been struck.

Eyes boring Ben, he said harshly:

“Have you gone out of your head, Cragg?”

Ben said: “Not yet. I’m hoping to—later on, Kelborn. For the moment I’m going to remain sane and have these rats held for bombing Alsop’s theatres. With them behind the bars, we won’t need to sweat on one going up in smoke tomorrow.”

“The cops can take a look around here,” said Ben, carrying on his bluff. “They’ll find enough pineapples to stock a crimson fruit store.” He wagged the gun at the scowling crooks. “Come along, you pair of Romeos, or do I have to tickle your toes with lead?”

Spider swore in rage; his eyes glittered at the gun drooping in Ben’s hand. Himey was advancing slowly from the table.

“You’ll pay for this,” snarled Spider, and took a step forward.

Suddenly Ben’s view was blocked. Dave Kelborn was standing right in front of him and there was a look on his face not good to see. He said quiveringly:

“Maybe you think you’re smart, Cragg. You’re butting into my plans. I’ve got a line on those papers and you aren’t going to spoil it all by this sucker play. Take my tip—and clear out!”

Ben stared into the narrowed gray eyes that were not a foot from his own. He said distinctly: “Take my tip, Kelborn, and keep those hands further from your pockets.”

Kelborn said slowly, as though speaking with difficulty: “Just what do you mean?”

“I mean that if you make a phony move, it’s pretty damn certain this gat’ll shake some of the dust from your clothes. Clear enough?”

A GRAY look came over Kelborn’s face. Cragg was alert for the detective making a fast move for the gun which Cragg knew he carried in his coat pocket. So absorbed was Cragg that he didn’t notice a slight draft as the door opened. His first warning of another in the room were words uttered in a hard, feminine voice:

“Drop that gun, slick, or by God, you’ll get it!”

Ben remained staring grimly into Dave Kelborn’s eyes. He thought he saw relief, perhaps triumph there. For the first time the suspicion definitely crystallized that his companion detective was double-crossing. The thought came to him that Dave Kelborn was working with these crooks in the blackmail-bombing racket against the movie magnate. That he was selling his boss’ interests instead of protecting them!

His seething thoughts were pierced by the woman’s voice and he caught the ugly note in it, the threat that sounded dangerously sincere.

“You in the Palm Beach suit, I give you two seconds to drop that gat!”

The revolver in Ben’s hand moved with savage reluctance down Kelborn’s coat front and thudded to the carpet. Ben slowly turned and faced the woman.

She was standing in the doorway, a full-bodied woman dressed in a brown business suit. A white, silk handkerchief, Ascot style, around her throat gave her a hard-boiled appearance. She wore no powder or paint, nothing to soften the hard lines of her face. Her eyes were as bereft of softness as the small caliber gun she had lined on Cragg. Ben was glad he had dropped his weapon when he did.

“It’s not a Palm Beach suit, sister,” he said. “It’s a light gray—it was this morning.”

She gave him a queer look from her queerly merciless eyes, then let them travel to the other three men. In a voice that was a little hoarse, she said:

“I came to find out who killed Steve Gold. I figure someone here knows something about it.”

Ben watched surprised looks come to the faces of the three. Kelborn’s face was the first to slip back to its habitual mask and he shrugged without comment.

Spider Gatty muttered: “Don’t get what you’re driving at, Elsie. Is Steve croaked?”

The woman came into the room and closed the door behind her. Ben noticed that a big, fawn-colored pocketbook she carried under her arm did not impede her handling of the gun. She said through thinned lips:

“Right away I’ll tell you I’m in no mood for lies. I’ll get the truth even if this gat has to do some persuading. You savee?” She seemed to scream the words quietly, queer though it sounds.

Dave Kelborn said coldly: “Maybe if you’d tell us what happened, Elsie—”

The woman’s slate-colored eyes rested on him, on each of them in turn. “I heard from the cops that Steve was killed. They said by a bomb at Aaron Alsop’s office. They figured he was planting it there. I know different. Steve was plugged before that bomb went off. There’s nobody leaving this room until I find out who killed my man!”

A definite change came over Spider Gatty. Ben, seeing it, suspected that the killer had a real fear of the woman. The green eyes showed it, the shifting feet also.

Cragg was trying hard to label the woman. He placed her as a product of Hell’s Kitchen dens, the type that met men on men’s ground and held her own. Was she the Elsie Clinton who had phoned Aaron Alsop’s office? Was she the woman who had perpetrated a cold-blooded murder in that empty house?

If so, why this different story? Previously she had accused the movie magnate of killing Steve Gold, an obviously preposterous charge, and she had sounded pretty hysterical about it. Now, without the hysteria, but looking very dangerous, she was pinning Steve Gold’s murder on one of the men here.

Ben’s puzzled thoughts were interrupted by Spider Gatty’s half whine, half growl: “Don’t get careless with that rod, Elsie. I swear I—we don’t know nothing about it. We wouldn’t have bumped Goldy. The idea’s crazy?”

“I’m no fool, Spider,” flashed the woman. “Maybe you’ll tell me next you didn’t make

the bomb that covered Steve’s croaking. You know who did the job—if you didn’t do it yourself. Spill it before I burn a hole through your lousy carcass.”

“See here, Elsie,” Dave Kelborn cut in harshly, “nobody finds out things like this in a hurry. I’ll look around. I’ll find out who did it—”

“*You’ll find out who did it!*” repeated the woman in savage sarcasm. There was a light of insanity in her slate-colored eyes. Ben had heard of a woman dope addict who’d committed a wholesale massacre once. His fingers edged nearer the opening of his coat.

“You rats,” said the woman bitterly. “I wouldn’t trust any one of you. I had Steve Gold look around to see whether you were double-crossing me, holding back on the dough. I reckon that’s why he was spotted. Himey, tell me who it was did it. The rat’ll get it where Steve got it!”

“Search me,” shrugged Himey. “I don’t know a damned thing about it!”

THE woman’s smoldering gaze came around to Ben’s. Ben’s face was pale and unruffled; his blue eyes as mild as a parson’s. He said calmly: “I can tell you who killed your boy friend, sister.”

With the naive statement, Ben sensed that he had stripped dynamite. He also believed that Steve Gold’s murderer was present, and he was alert for some swift move. While an electric silence held the room, the woman stared at him.

At last she said the one word, in a queer voice: “Who?”

“I prefer not to tell you here,” shrugged Ben. “Maybe we could go some place?”

Her eyes bored him. “Who the hell are you, anyhow?”

“He’s one of Alsop’s dicks,” snarled Spider Gatty, and held forward a bleeding fist. “See what he did to me?”

The woman didn’t look at it. She was staring at Ben. He grinned.

“One of Alsop’s dicks,” he repeated. “I’m his star dick—with Dave Kelborn a close second.”

The woman sneered: “So? That’s interesting. Maybe you’re the guy can tell me things I want to know. Take a step this way, dook. I’ll see you haven’t got any more rods lined up your sleeve.”

Ben moved toward the woman. His blood moved faster as he got a closer view of her face. It was older than he’d suspected and had the reckless abandon of the underworld character who treats life and death casually.

She told him: “I don’t have to advise you to lay off any funny stuff.” Her free hand moved around his coat pockets.

A cold feeling ran up Cragg’s spine. Her searching hand lingered on his right coat pocket. In that pocket, amongst other things, were the black dice he’d taken from Steve Gold! Those skull dots might well be symbols of death in his case!

Watching her cold eyes for a warning, he was prepared to risk the gun shoved into his stomach if her hand should enter that pocket. He knew that the woman’s passion for revenge would spill the moment she saw the dice that had belonged to her man.

She passed over his outer pockets. The frozen smile on his face relaxed. She found an automatic under his armpit and skated it beneath a settee. That seemed to satisfy her. She said: “If you still feel like talking, dook, we’ll take the air.”

“Sure,” nodded Cragg.

She told the others: “I’ll be around to see you later.”

There was no move from anybody as they left. Cragg’s last glimpse of Dave Kelborn’s face showed him an expression deadly in its cold fury.

The young hood was in the passage, shifty-eyed and punctured-looking. Cragg elbowed him in the belly and said: “We missed you at the party, Gus. But Kelborn saved a stiff highball for you. Ask him for it.”

“Save the chatter,” the woman advised him.

Out on the street, Cragg turned. Elsie Clinton had deposited her gun somewhere—probably in her big pocketbook. “Where to, sister?” he said.

She signaled a passing taxi. “I’ll do the leading, dook,” she said.

CHAPTER IV

THE taxi took them to a saloon on Twenty-third Street. The woman had no word to say during the ride. That suited Ben. He had lighted a cigar, and, while blowing smoke rings, charted the course he had started on.

His story that he could tell her who had killed her man had not been intended to discomfort Kelborn and Gatty, although he knew it had. It had been prompted by the suspicion that had come to him that this Elsie Clinton was the woman who held the papers all important to Aaron Alsop. Why play with Spider Gatty when he could work on the main source?

The woman paid the driver. Ben didn’t argue. They entered the saloon.

It was a big place. Ben quickly sensed that Elsie Clinton was something more than a nonentity there. He saw it in the looks of the three men behind the long bar, in the subservient manner of the waiter who, at a nod from the woman, led the way to an alcove well in the rear.

Inside the alcove, with curtains dropped, sounds from the bar vanished. Ben and the woman took places on opposite sides of the table large enough for four. She told the waiter: “Bring me a Monnet, a long one.”

“A whiskey sour for me,” said Ben, pulling forward an ash tray.

The waiter left. The woman lit a cigarette, held it in the corner of her mouth.

“The place suit you?” she asked him.

“Absolutely,” assured Cragg. “I’ve been here before, anyhow, when Joe Oxley ran it.

Maybe you own it now?"

She exhaled a volume of smoke. "Joe Oxley's dead. I get my own way around here, mister—what's the handle?"

"Cragg. Ben Cragg."

"Yeah, I get my own way around here, Cragg." There was a distinct threat in the dry repetition.

The drinks arrived. The woman took a good gulp at her brandy as though she required a tonic. The only effect of the spirits was to accentuate the downward grooves around her mouth and eyes.

When the waiter had gone, she put an elbow—the left one—on the table and leaned forward.

"You," she said, "can tell me something I had Steve Gold trying to find out. Did Aaron Alsop come across to Spider with the dough or didn't he?"

Ben's untasted whiskey sour was in his hand. He stared into it. He got a swift hunch that a chance was offering to play a deep game. Her question opened the gate wide. He raised the drink to his lips, brought it down and grimaced, although it wasn't bad.

"Well?" she demanded, and there was an ugly huskiness in her voice.

Ben put his drink down on the table, put his cigar into his mouth. "Before I answer that one, sister, I've got one to ask—and I reckon it rates being answered first."

"Spin it, big boy."

"Did you phone Alsop at his office in the Monarch Building at eight-twenty tonight?"

"No. Why?"

"The dame that phoned sounded mad. She had a kinder hard-boiled voice—a bit like yours," said Cragg coolly. "She accused Alsop of killing Steve Gold; and she said her name was Elsie Clinton."

An ugly gleam crept into the woman's eyes. One of her hands was out of sight in her lap. She said quietly: "You tryin' to be funny, mister?"

"Not at all. This dame had a queer lisp.

Made me think she was spitting a lot into the phone. The phone call wasn't the end of it. I said I'd go around to see her and explain what we knew about Gold's death. She gave me an address on Eleventh. It was an empty house. Somebody was waiting upstairs to load me with lead souvenirs. A poor drunk got it instead of me."

Ben removed the cigar from his lips, picked up his drink and over it watched the change that came over Elsie Clinton's face. There was something about it that made Ben think of a savage animal leader that is suddenly confronted with treachery from its pack.

Her knuckles were white around her glass. Her eyes burned at Cragg and he suspected that her fingers were wrapped around her gun. "It's the jane who takes care of my house," she ground out slowly. "She was put up to it by Kelborn, the lousy, double-crosser!"

She gulped the remainder of her drink, jarred the glass down and broke it.

"I wondered why she didn't look surprised when I said Steve had been croaked. She'd just come in. She'd been playing Kelborn's game." Her voice ended in a quivering snarl: "It was Kelborn who killed Steve Gold, wasn't it?"

Cragg stared into her blazing eyes. He thought of the dust on Kelborn's clothes, dust perhaps from that empty house. He recalled that besides himself, Kelborn possessed a key to Aaron Alsop's downtown office. He recalled the slinking steps he had heard in the corridor; only Kelborn would have known his way around there.

Everything pointed to Kelborn. He must have seen Steve Gold approach the office and had failed to warn him. Perhaps he'd been hoping for two birds with one stone. Which would indicate that it was true that he was double-crossing Elsie Clinton also.

Cragg said: "I couldn't prove it. I only found out tonight he's two-timing Alsop."

She stared at him for a long while. Ben

toyed with a piece of the glass she had broken. Finally she said: "Why the hell did you hand me that bull when we were there at Spider's place?"

"I was in a hot spot," shrugged Ben.

"You're not off it," she warned grimly. "Now we'll get back to what I asked you in the beginning." She brushed the broken glass away from Ben's fiddling fingers. He looked up. "Did Alsop pay Spider that two hundred grand yet?"

Ben had had time to study the question. He nodded calmly, meeting her searching gaze. "Half of it. Not all. The rest comes when he produces the papers."

IF he'd slapped her, she wouldn't have started more. He got a cold feeling that he'd chosen the wrong time to lie. He didn't like the look that came to her bloodless face. But his gaze was without a flicker.

She said huskily: "The rat! If that's true—Listen, you fool. Spider never had the papers. He never will." Sudden suspicion came to her eyes. "What was the trouble when I blew in? You had the drop on them."

Ben stared moodily at a broken smoke ring. "I got sore with the mutts. Spider had promised to have the papers tonight. He said he'd get them later—an old stall."

"Later? When?"

"He said he'd have them by eleven. He had to get them from a friend's house. Maybe he means to get them at that. He knows he won't get the rest of the dough until he does." Ben pulled out his watch and looked at it, muttered: "It's ten-ten now."

The woman's face was gray enough to be ghastly. For what seemed an interminable length of time to Ben, she just sat and stared at him. Suddenly she got up.

Ben's breath relaxed. It was what he had been waiting for. It was probable that she would make for home, or wherever the papers were. She half pushed through the curtains, called harshly: "Vicky!"

A black-eyed, slick-haired waiter shoved in. He was husky, made Ben think of a modern chucker-out. The woman whispered to him. Ben saw the black eyes stare at him. Then he withdrew again.

Ben drained the last of his whiskey sour and rose. Elsie Clinton was standing by the curtains, her large hands, as big as a man's, twitching with her impatience. Her cold eyes, half contemptuous, half suspicious, met his.

"Guess I'll get along to report to the boss," said Ben.

The curtains parted and the big waiter was framed there. "Guess again," he said oilily.

Ben stared at him. Then shrugged "Guess I could," he said coolly.

The waiter's napkin didn't fully cover a glinting muzzle, a revolver. The waiter's dead fish expression was in perfect harmony with the gun. Ben felt he was used to using that kind of hardware.

The woman said grimly: "I wouldn't trust this bird too much, Vicky. If you have to—" Her pause was eloquent. "I'll take care of you, see? I'll be back in half an hour."

The man nodded and Elsie Clinton went out.

Ben sat down again with a sigh. He pushed forward his empty glass. "Would you mind getting me another whiskey sour, waiter?" he said.

The waiter grinned, not a nice grin, but appreciative. "Nerve enough," he commented. "But don't stretch it, buddy." He took the place the woman had vacated and faced Ben across the table. The revolver lay comfortably in his right palm.

Ben took the stub of the cigar from his mouth and ground it in the ash tray. His expression was his usual outer pose, smooth and bland. But he was annoyed, to put it mildly. His ingenuous story had gone for nothing. He was missing the big chance by not being on Elsie Clinton's trail.

He stared at the waiter. Why had she put this heel onto him? It was probably because

she hadn't swallowed his story whole. What would she do when she got back?

He felt in his pocket for another cigar and was aware of the intentness of the big waiter. His fingers encountered the bizarre dice and tautened. It would be a swell idea to unload them at the first chance, he reflected. They were hot goods.

He brought out a cigar, used a piece of the shattered brandy glass to cut the end off. He lit it, wreathed a smoke ring upward and said: "I'll bet you five bucks she don't get back in half an hour—I'll make it forty-five minutes."

The waiter eyed him narrowly. "Yeah? What gives you that idea?"

"She just couldn't make the round trip in that time," said Ben calmly, toying with a tiny fragment of glass. He could feel that the glass had a needle point on it "Even though she's in a hurry."

"I take the bet," said the man deliberately. "She can make it easy."

Ben grinned. "Want to double the bet, triple it?"

"Say, what's the gag?" The waiter scowled. "You know something?"

"Sure," said Ben, and swirled a smoke ring across the table. It wreathed into the man's face. Under cover of it, Ben's middle finger flicked the fragment of glass a few inches. It slid to a stop by the waiter's right hand, the gun hand.

"Sure I know something. Why do you think I bet? I know that dame can't make Ninety-sixth Street and back in forty-five minutes. Not unless she makes the trip on a fire engine."

"You're nuts," growled the waiter, weaving his head. "And keep that lousy cigar to yourself, will you? Who said she's going to Ninety-sixth Street? She's going home."

Ben leaned well forward on the table and cupped his chin in his palms. "Correct. To her swell apartment on Ninety-sixth," he said pleasantly. "She sold the other place last week."

The waiter looked puzzled and angry. He growled: "She sold the house on—"

He polled himself up short, handed Ben a dirty look, and his gun hand moved meaningly. The last act started things. His fingers were stabbed by the sharp piece of glass; he jumped and swore and his eyes dropped.

Cragg had been waiting for just that. His hands flew from his chin, pounced upon the waiter's, and in less than a second, the big waiter was blinking in savage rage at his own gun looking at him from the hand of the smiling Ben Cragg.

"Yeah, she sold the house on—? Finish it," urged Ben softly.

The sleek waiter was not lacking in guts. He glared at Cragg and called him some choice names. At the wind up of them, he made a sudden dive across the table. Cragg ducked the flailing big hands and came up inside them. The gun muzzle laid itself across the waiter's heavy jaw. The man's head weaved like a punchdrunk boxer's, his black eyes fixed in dazed fury upon Cragg.

"Pardon me," muttered Ben, and brought the gun muzzle down again, this time at the roots of the thick hair. The thud rang in the confined space, and it marked the end. Ben steered the fall of the limp man into the bench and the waiter lolled there as though he'd had a drink too many.

CRAGG stepped swiftly to the curtains and peered out. Nobody outside had heard the short scuffle. He rounded the table and stared down at the unconscious waiter.

"You wouldn't have talked, anyhow," he told himself. "Now you've left me up a tree. Where in hell does that dame live?"

He picked up his cigar from the table, moved to the curtains and cautiously surveyed the saloon. The bar was busy and the three bartenders hustling. It wasn't likely that anybody would stop him from leaving.

Then a gleam came to his eyes. Just beside

the alcove was a phone booth, and a directory opened beside it gave him his idea. He waited until the men behind the bar were safely occupied and then moved swiftly into the booth. He took in with him the Manhattan directory.

In two minutes he had found the number of the phone behind the bar. His next search was for a nickel. He grunted in disgust as his hand came out with six pennies, a safety pin and a stick of ragged chewing gum.

A few moments later he slipped from the booth again and re-entered the alcove. The waiter hadn't stirred an inch. Ben's hand dived into his pockets and took out a nickel. The man groaned and Ben hurried.

He got back into the phone booth, keeping an eye on the bar through the glass door as he paid his nickel and got his number.

Listening, he heard the phone back of the bar buzzing. He saw one of the bartenders move back and pick up the phone. "Hullo?" came to Ben's ear.

"Listen," said Ben, "this is Elsie's place. Send up a bottle of Three Star Monnet in a hurry."

"Who's this?" Ben heard the bartender say, and saw him lean forward.

"What the hell do you care?" shot back Ben. "Elsie says get a hustle on. She's waiting for the stuff."

He was watching the man at the phone. He hadn't a lot of confidence in his trick. Yet Elsie Clinton had told him she got her own way in this joint. It might mean a lot, or nothing. He was pleasantly surprised when he heard the bartender's sullen: "Okay."

Ben didn't hang up right away. He puffed clouds of smoke and pretended to be talking furiously into the phone, now dead. He saw the bartender confer with his companions. Saw him reach down for a bottle of the required brandy, shed his apron, bring a coat from a recess at one end of the bar. The bartender left the bar by a flap near the door.

Ben stepped from the phone booth. He

took two steps and then he pulled up. The waiter was framing the parted curtains of the alcove. He seemed to have a bad hangover, but there was a deadly look in his black eyes. His mouth opened to shout.

Cragg's fist shot into his stomach; it emptied the wind out of the man and sent him reeling back into the alcove. Ben took a fleeting glance toward the bar. Again he was lucky; nobody had seen the swift play.

He stepped through the curtains. The waiter snarled hungrily and plunged forward. Ben's hand whizzed and there was a glinting arc. The revolver butt landed with a sickening thud. The man didn't even groan.

Wheeling on his heel, Ben walked briskly through the saloon, brushing cigar ashes from his coat.

CHAPTER V

A TAXI was moving from the curb and Cragg knew the bartender was in it. There wasn't another in sight and on impulse Cragg sprinted. He made the rear bumper. The cigar left his mouth in a shower of sparks and he also badly nipped a finger.

But he was perched, even if uncomfortably. His first thought was to get a reassuring glimpse of the passenger. He saw the back of a fat neck and was satisfied.

At Ninth Avenue the cab turned uptown. An elevated train caught up with them and thundered overhead. For a while they ran neck and neck. Before the Thirtieth Street station, the taxi dropped behind. It drew up before a house.

Ben was off the bumper before it stopped and on the sidewalk. The pavements glistened from the recent rain and served to accentuate the gloom under the "L." Idling in a doorway, Cragg saw the bartender leave the cab and enter another doorway.

Waiting there, Cragg speculated as to Elsie Clinton's feelings. Whom would she suspect of the phony call? Certainly not him. The

trouble about the trick was that it would put her on the alert. In any event, Cragg meant to get inside that house.

He heard steps on the sidewalk and saw the bartender making for the taxi again. He appeared to be in a huff; he didn't have the package of liquor now. As soon as the cab hummed away, Ben sauntered from his shelter and approached the doorway the bartender had come out of.

A small light illuminated the outside lobby and the first thing Ben saw was the package of liquor standing outside the door. With ruffled brow, Ben stared at it. The bartender couldn't have just planked it there and left. He'd been inside all of two minutes. Why hadn't it been delivered?

A gleam came to Cragg's eyes. There was only one answer. There was nobody home. Either Elsie Clinton hadn't come here or else she had left within the last few minutes. Was she on her way back to the saloon?

If she was, then time was precious. Ben quickly pulled out the flat leather case with its assortment of skeleton keys. In all, he tried a score of them. He was just getting desperate enough to jam the revolver against the lock when it gave before a key.

The door opened before his pressure and he stepped inside. It was dark, but Cragg produced a pocket torch. He then proceeded with an exploration that was conducted with less thought for the danger than for the time element.

It didn't take him long to discard the possibilities of the ground floor. He moved up the stairs, his torch dancing a path of light before him. At the top a passage ran in two directions. He followed a hunch and worked toward the rear.

The first door he tried opened and he saw a bedroom. It was simply furnished. A few articles of woman's clothing were tossed upon the bed. He figured it was Elsie Clinton's room.

Facing it across the passage was another

room. The door was locked.

Ben cursed softly and tested it with his shoulder; he was past caring what noise he made. The door was too solid. He brought out his keys again.

It seemed ages before he found one that worked. But he did, and it was with anticipation that he stepped into the room. His torch showed in silvery relief table, chairs, bookcase and a desk. The desk was backed across a corner. It looked very solid. He thought it looked a plausible repository for valuables.

He moved swiftly toward it, put his hand on the top and tried it. It raised up under his pressure. He stared with narrowed eyes at a jumble of papers and envelopes.

Was this Elsie Clinton's handiwork, he asked himself? He was inclined to disbelieve it. She struck him as being a methodical woman. An uneasy thought came to him. And then as though the thought had been a signal, corroboration came right away.

The room flooded with light. Ben whirled, hand dashing to his pocket. He stared into the glittering eyes of Dave Kelborn, felt the gun that pressed into his stomach. Ben's hand stopped with the fingers barely in the pocket. He knew death when he stared it in the face. He knew Dave Kelborn.

"I might have guessed it would be you, Cragg," said Kelborn smoothly. "It was lucky for us we waited long enough to see you. Very lucky, Cragg."

An ugly laugh came from across the room. It came from Spider Gatty who had turned on the lights. He came forward and Ben saw a manila envelope in his hand. Ben knew without telling that the envelope contained the papers so precious to Aaron Alsop.

"We've got him where we want him," snarled Spider. "Bump him and leave him here. Elsie can take the rap for it"

The green-eyed, scarred-faced crook slashed the envelope across Cragg's face. "Look at my fingers," he said savagely. They

were still dirtily crimson. "It's nothing to what you're gonna get!"

Kelborn found the gun in Cragg's pocket and gave a mirthless smile. He found the dice, the black ones with the skull dots.

"Cute," he murmured, jiggling them in his palm. "They will always remind me of my late friend Cragg."

"Croak him," growled Spider impatiently, "and let's go. She might come back."

"Whether she does or not," said Kelborn coldly, "she's seen the last of the papers. Cragg will be pleased to know that you and I will squeeze Alsop for a million before we're through."

Cragg shouted. "You rat! You lousy rat!"

Kelborn hit him. It brought blood through Cragg's teeth. Kelborn's gun bored harder and Ben's blue eyes stared. But the bullet didn't come. Kelborn hissed:

"You've been too damned lucky, Cragg. Goldie stepped into your grave, the fool. I'd planted that nice little cigar for you. And I don't know yet how you missed it in the empty house. I thought I drilled you twice. But your luck's through now."

Kelborn growled at Spider, his gaze never leaving Cragg: "Where are those fuses I brought you tonight? Have you got them with you?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I'm not leaving this egg for Elsie to fall over. She'll squawk on us even if she gets the hot seat herself. We'll burn the place down. Light a fuse and dump it in the waste basket. Stick it under the curtains there. This old dump'll burn down in no time. The cops can puzzle over Cragg's bones."

"Swell idea," grinned Spider. He slithered around behind Ben, giving Ben a savage kick in passing.

BEN heard him strike a match. He stared into Kelborn's sneering, watchful eyes and prepared to gamble the few seconds left to him.

Then he saw something. The door of the room was pushing farther in. Around it came the colorless face of Elsie Clinton. If the face was colorless, however, blazing eyes more than made up for it. Her voice whipped through the room: "What's going on in my house?"

To the three men who were playing a deadly game, the question had no two meanings. Dave Kelborn stepped half way from Cragg so that he could see the woman and still watch Cragg. His face was a mask, but Ben knew that his cold eyes were taking in the woman, looking for a weapon. He said evenly:

"Spider and me happened to be passing. We saw this egg breaking in and followed him. He'd broken into your desk and got an envelope out of it when we grabbed him."

It was stalling, Ben knew. Kelborn didn't expect to be believed. He was going to let the woman have it at the first flare-up. Spider shuffled by Ben and the draught of his movement brought a whiff of something burning to Ben's nose.

Elsie Clinton said, without passion: "Kind of you. Then why was Spider trying to hide the envelope behind his back?"

Kelborn laughed. While he kept his gun leveled at Cragg, his left hand carelessly tossed up and caught the skull dice he had taken from Cragg. He repeated the motion a few times before he noticed Elsie Clinton's strange stare.

"Well," he demanded a bit irritably, "don't you believe us?"

"So," said the woman, in a strange voice, coming farther into the room, "it was you who killed Goldie? I knew it! There's the proof in your hand, you dirty double-crossers!"

Kelborn swore. Simultaneously a sound like a tiny firecracker exploding came from behind them. Cragg's blood raced. The fire was under way!

"Keep your trap shut!" snarled Kelborn, his gun swinging onto the woman.

She was quick, extraordinarily quick for a woman. A gun came from her big pocketbook as though by magic. Cragg ducked and dived at Kelborn's feet

Two roars shook the room. On his stomach, Ben saw Elsie Clinton stiffen, reel. Then Kelborn wriggled over and his distorted face glared at Ben from back of his gun. Ben dropped flat. Hell roared in his ears, he felt scorching heat go down the back of his collar.

From somewhere came another shot, two. Kelborn's savage look changed; Ben saw a dribble of blood come from his mouth. The big detective went suddenly limp and fell on top of Cragg. Ben wriggled clear, feeling hot blood drip onto his face.

His first impression as he raised to his knees was that the room was well on fire. His second that a small battle was raging. He saw Elsie Clinton, disheveled and insane of expression, on her side by the door. She was pumping lead at Spider who had taken refuge behind the desk and was swearing violently.

The crook saw Ben as Ben saw him. At six yards it was a miracle that his two shots missed. They did, and he didn't get another chance. Cragg had come up with Kelborn's gun. He shot twice. Two round holes came into being on the snarling crook's forehead, began to trickle crimson before he sank slowly from sight.

The room was becoming an inferno. The flames had used the curtains as a springboard and were now reaching around the paneled room. The smoke was suffocating.

Ben moved across the room, finding it every moment harder to see the woman. He stumbled over her, panting on the floor. She saw him and Cragg put his foot on the gun in her hand. She drew a shuddering breath, gasped:

"Scram, dook. It's getting around the door. You'll be cut off."

"Can you get up?" demanded Ben.

She shook her head. "One in the leg. I think two in the chest. Leave me."

Ben got her under the armpits. "Try and help a bit and we'll make it."

She showed a sudden spasm of rage. "You'll cook, you fool! I'm too heavy for you. I—I can't move an inch. Get to hell out and leave me!" She struck him in the face.

He hit her back, then strained up under her weight. The room was getting like a furnace, the flames roaring a devastating song.

She was heavy. He sweat, every step a torture of scorching flame. They fell through the flame-smothered doorway into the passage. Burnt hair and flesh was in Ben's nostrils.

When Ben let the woman down on the floor of the passage, he almost dropped on top of her. He leaned against the wall and gulped in air that was still better than that in the inferno of a room.

"There's a fire-escape at the end," the woman gasped, and then she just keeled over on the floor.

Ben waited until he felt some of his strength return. He got her under the armpits again. It was the longest trip he'd ever made to that fire-escape. The fire was into the passage before he made it and his eyes were red and streaming from the smoke.

The cool, damp night air was the most delicious he had ever breathed. He looked down at the huddle of the woman.

She stirred, groaned. Ben could hear her gulping in air.

"I've got to get you down," he said shortly. "This fire-escape isn't going to be any ice box soon."

She surprised him by saying: "I can walk."

She did it, with a few groans and much laboring. Ben saved her a couple of times from falling. They reached the gloom of the yards in the rear.

Ben said: "I'm through. Your blackmailing racket is through. The papers were with Spider. They'll be a hell of a lot of good to anybody now. You'll have your troubles explaining the skeletons to the cops."

She laughed. He stared at her. Her face was a dim, triangular shape in the black. He thought he saw a queer look on it. She said quietly:

“That envelope Spider had was a phony. I planted it for them after you told me that tale.”

Ben started. He forgot her wounds, gripped her and shook her roughly. “Don’t try that gag on me,” he growled.

They stared at each other in the dark. Above and behind them a glow was beginning to tinge the night. From the direction of Ninth Avenue came the sound of fire engine sirens.

The woman gave a mirthless laugh and said: “I like you, dook. Funny, eh? The papers are in my bag here.”

She had evidently clung to her bag throughout, something Ben hadn’t noticed.

She opened it. Ben saw an envelope. She gave it to him.

“I wanted to cook,” she said, “when I was up there. I don’t now, not in the chair, at any rate. You can put in your word if I get hauled for this job. You’ve got Alsop’s papers. They’re the genuine. I’ll—disappear.”

She did. Her dark figure was lost to Ben’s eyes in a few seconds. He drew a deep breath, thrust the envelope into his pocket.

He climbed a back fence. He got around to Ninth Avenue to find it cluttered with fire apparatus and a crowd. Firemen were up on the “L” track.

An onlooker said to him: “There’s ain’t gonna be a stick left to that house. Lucky there was nobody home.”