

Harlequin's Death Mask



Unusual "Baxter" Novelet

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The Mardi Gras—America's great masquerade. Floats and costumes and pretty girls and parades. And Murder. Baxter, the All-American sleuth, jumps headlong into this crime carnival—and finds himself wearing a new kind of death mask.

CHAPTER I

THE WARNING

BAXTER got delivered to the Claiborne joint in a limousine with a private chauffeur. He'd always figured that the only time he'd ever ride in state like that, the car would be a hearse and he'd be lying flat in a tuxedo. Which just went to show that he was wrong, as usual.

He walked up the steps and watched the door swing open. He was impressed. His dark eyes blazed and he rubbed his small black mustache, second growth. He figured people who lived like this would get insulted if he

didn't slap on a full grand for a retainer. And that was a happy thought.

He stepped into a vast entrance hall with a fountain in the center and a broad, curving staircase at the rear. The butler was a flat-faced guy with shoe-button eyes. He said: "Mr. Baxter? This way, sir. They're expecting you."

He led the way toward the doorway at the right. Baxter followed almost as far as the fountain, and then he got sidetracked.

She was sitting under a lamp that turned her hair into a halo, and she had the best pair of legs he'd seen that month. Without a break in his stride, he swung left and stopped in the doorway. Then he wet his lips and just looked.

She had a long, thin, sensitive face, and in her lap she held the death mask of a man. Her delicate fingers stroked it gently, along the forehead and then down the cheekbones. The lips were parted, and the green of her dress showed like damp mold through the open mouth and the wide, empty eye-slits of the mask.

When she looked up and saw him, she gave a little start. "Oh! You frightened me!"

"Sorry. I saw you and thought I'd let you know I was here. I'm Baxter."

"The detective?" She gazed at him with stark terror, and she spoke in a rush of words. "I made them send for you. You've got to persuade my husband to leave town. He can't stay here and be shot at. He's being stubborn and ridiculous!"

"Sure," said Baxter soothingly. She had gray eyes and she was small and slender and she burned with a kind of witch's fire, and there was much more to her than a pair of legs. "Sure," he repeated, "What's that thing?"

"The mask?" Her hands stroked it with a queer, caressing movement, and her voice was unsteady. "It's for a carnival. You know about the parades with floats, and then the masked balls that are given afterwards. My husband and Pat belong to the organization that's running the parade tomorrow night. This is the mask that everybody's wearing. I was just looking at it."

"It's a nice mask," observed Baxter, "but you handle it wrong. The guy's dead."

IT FELL from her lap as she sprang up and darted across the room. She collided against the wall, but her eyes never left Baxter, and in their depths was the mad bewilderment of some wild, trapped creature. She cringed against the wall as if it were her sole protection.

"How did you know?" she asked.

Baxter shook his head. "I don't know what this is all about, but whatever it is, I'm one guy you can trust. We Northerners better stick

together."

She straightened up and came forward slowly.

"Well?" said Baxter. "Do we make a team?"

But before she could answer, a little man trotted in and practically popped up from underneath Baxter's armpit. He had long pointed ears, like a rabbit's. He said: "Sandra, my dear—what are you doing?"

Then he picked up the mask and turned to Baxter. "I'm Arthur Claiborne. My cousin Pat and I were waiting for you across the hall."

"I know," replied Baxter. "I detoured."

Sandra's laugh was a tinkle that should have been recorded for rebroadcasting purposes. All the fear swept out of her and she gave out a gay, winsome quality that went to Baxter's head like champagne. He was willing to stop, look and listen more or less indefinitely, but there seemed to be obstacles. He figured she'd make a first-rate widow, and, though he hated to lose a client via the murder route, it might be worth it this time.

He turned and followed Arthur across the hall.

Baxter didn't know much about the case. Pat Claiborne had waddled into the office this afternoon and announced: "They're trying to kill my cousin Arthur, and I hate funerals. I want it stopped."

Baxter hadn't been pleased. Mardi Gras was only three days off and tonight there was a torchlight parade with floats and brass bands and souvenirs, and he wanted to go. But business was business. And, though he'd had nothing but Mardi Gras in mind when he'd driven out, Sandra Claiborne had changed all that.

Sandra. It was a nice name.

Pat Claiborne was spread out on the couch like a big jellyfish that overflowed onto the rug. He was leaning back wearily and scooping little gobs of caviar from a small glass jar.

He waved the spoon at Baxter. "Evening,"

he said. "Have some? Contains vitamin T. The anti-boredom principle."

"No, thanks," replied Baxter. He gazed thoughtfully across the hall. "I don't expect to be bored around here."

He examined the room. Somebody collected sculpture. There were bronzes and marbles and plasters. There were horses and birds and dogs and busts, and, near the window, a white plaster head of Pat Claiborne gazed solemnly at the piano and made no comment.

"Who do you figure is behind this business?" began Baxter.

Arthur shook his head, and his mouth twitched nervously. "I don't know who could have anything against me," he said. "I lead a quiet life."

Quiet was right. Baxter peppered him with questions and eliminated gambling, women, financial trouble and business rivals. Which left Baxter high and dry, so he went after the details of the attempt on Arthur's life.

"It was very disconcerting," declared Arthur fussily. "About a week ago, Pat and I were getting out of the car when somebody fired a shot. It whistled past me and struck the door post of the car."

"See anybody?"

"He ran like hell," interrupted Pat. "That is, Arthur did. He fell, but the gunman didn't want to shoot him in the pants and that was the only thing that showed."

"How about the letter you mentioned?"

Arthur twitched out of his chair and brought Baxter a typewritten envelope. It was addressed to Mr. Claiborne, and the letter inside read:

The first time was just a warning. You will die before the end of the Mardi Gras.

Arthur said, "You may find fingerprints. I only touched the corners," and Baxter remarked:

"Sounds definite enough. Mardi Gras. That gives him three days. Say a thousand dollars. Money back if you get bumped."

Arthur made a face, but he sat down and wrote the check. Baxter observed: "You'll have to stay in the house till Mardi Gras is over. I'll move in, and you won't have any worries."

It was a nice case. He'd lock Arthur in a room upstairs and spend his time with Sandra.

But Arthur objected, strenuously. "At the price I'm paying, I expect you to find the man who's threatening me. I can get protection for a great deal less."

No doubt about that. Baxter wondered whether he ought to tog Arthur out in a bullet-proof vest, but the little man didn't have the build. A steel vest weighed around twenty-five pounds and Arthur would die of exhaustion instead of bullets. And besides, they might shoot him in the head. Unless he wore a tin hat, like a Londoner. But everybody'd point and he'd get embarrassed to death.

BAXTER was agreeing to Arthur's proposition when the front door opened and a woman's voice shrilled out: "Oh, Sandra, my dear! I'm so glad to see you! Is Pat here? I had four Mardi Gras tourists for dinner and I thought I'd never get away. Is that detective here? I think it's so exciting. I just can't wait to see Arthur before he's killed. Aren't you simply thrilled?"

A big redhead with a wide, sulky mouth breezed in. Sandra followed, looking annoyed. Baxter studied her legs and only half saw the redhead march up to the couch and drape herself over the arm.

She leaned forward and kissed Pat on the ear. "Hello, darling. You simply reek of caviar."

Pat rumbled: "Baxter, this is Ruth Mae Crittenden. We're engaged and I don't know how it happened. She's nice, in a way, but confidentially—I don't want her."

That was hard to believe. If it hadn't been for Sandra, Baxter would have gone after the redhead, and no holds barred. She had something, all right. She kept on talking with that mouth of hers even when she wasn't uttering a word. And what she said with it couldn't be repeated.

She grinned, tickled Pat behind the ear and drawled: "Isn't he sweet? I just love eccentrics."

And then the Stukas came. Or at least it sounded that way.

A single shot exploded from the window. The glass broke with a ping and the whine of the bullet sounded out in a high, wailing shriek. Pat, with a scoopful of caviar on his spoon, jerked his hand and spilled. He swore softly and studied his trousers.

Arthur made a dive behind the nearest chair and stayed there on his hands and knees. The redhead began to scream and kept it going until Pat slapped her. As for Sandra, she sat down suddenly and forgot to pull down her dress. Baxter stared at her legs. After all, he'd seen gunfire lots of times.

For perhaps five seconds following the shot there was silence. And then the machine gun went to work and Baxter knew it was serious. Sandra shuddered as if she were about to have convulsions.

Baxter put his hand on her shoulder, but he didn't look at her. Instead, he looked at the window and saw the semi-transparent curtains wave and a thin tear appear in them. He followed the line of the rent and watched the plaster cast of Pat Claiborne crumple up.

For those few moments, the war came to New Orleans in a racket of noise and a tinkle of spattering glass. Abruptly as it had started, the firing stopped.

Baxter didn't move. He belonged to the school of thought which believed the guy with the machine gun was always right. So he stuck his hands in his pockets and glared at the wreck of the plaster cast.

The redhead yelled: "The fiends! They

tried to kill us! Oh!" She rolled her eyes and flopped sideways into Pat's arms. Sandra jumped up and ran to her.

Pat eased himself out of the couch. "Hell of a lot of good fainting does. Come on off the floor, Arthur. They missed us again."

Arthur let out a moaning sound and rose cautiously. His face was twitching at a great rate. Baxter turned to Pat and said:

"So you think they missed. What gave you the idea they were after Arthur, anyhow?"

"Been shooting at him all week, and they wrote him the love note, didn't they?"

"It's addressed merely to Mr. Claiborne. And if they missed Arthur, they missed you, too."

Pat sat down again. "Baxter," he said, "this is serious! You really think they were after me?"

Baxter pointed to the plaster cast. "Through the curtains they could see the outline of your head, but how would they know it was just a plaster cast?"

By then, Baxter figured it was safe to go outside. He'd given the machine gunner a full minute, and the boy should have made his getaway and left the coast clear.

But Baxter kept telling himself something was wrong, because, though traffic sounds reached the room clearly enough, he had heard no car. And if this chopper had gone out on a job and then walked home, it would be the first time in history that that had ever happened. Which gave Baxter a clue.

He strode across the entrance hall and then, cautiously, he pushed open the door. His eyes swept the garden and Baxter clamped his lips shut. Off to the left, where there was a break in the trees, he saw a silhouette flit in the general direction of the garage.

Baxter lowered his head and started running, but ten yards away he stopped short. He didn't have a chance of catching this boy scout in the dark. And besides, Baxter didn't want to catch machine gunners. Not while there were Sandras around. He figured it was

time to use his brains.

He stood there and stared at the drawn shades of the living room. He could see a dark smudge where the bullets had ripped through. But, even though he remembered the ornaments near the window, he couldn't identify them.

They were just dark, blurred masses, and a lamp looked the same as a figurine, and what he thought was the lamp got up and walked and so it was somebody inside. And that made him all wrong about the machine gunner drilling the plaster cast and thinking it was Pat.

Baxter walked up to the window and studied the shade. What had seemed a chance smudge became a clearly defined sketch of Pat, rough and done with a sifting of powder, but showing somebody what to aim at.

SUDDENLY the shade shot up with a bang like gunfire. Sandra Claiborne stood at the window and screamed once. Baxter yelled and flung himself on the ground as Pat fired directly at him.

Baxter bounced up, out of range, and saw that Sandra was still standing there. He forgot about the guy he'd seen heading for the garage and maybe doubling back to the house. He strode toward the door, smacked it open and pounded across the hall. He stopped in the doorway.

"Give me that gun," he snapped at Pat.

Pat shrugged. He was still holding the revolver. "I took it out after you left the room. Been carrying it ever since this scare Arthur had. I saw somebody at the window and fired without thinking."

Baxter was white with rage. "Give me that gun!" he roared. He marched across the room and grabbed it from Pat's hand. Then deliberately, he slapped Pat's face.

"People who use firearms and don't know the first thing about them ought to be jailed. Got a license for that thing?"

"No."

"You know you damn near killed Mrs. Claiborne, don't you? Not to speak of me."

The redhead jeered. "How gallant of you, Mr. Baxter. Thinking of Mrs. Claiborne first."

Baxter whirled. "I'm running this show, and I'll give my personal guarantee that one of you's going to land in jail as a result of tonight's business. Mr. Claiborne!" he barked at Arthur. "One of these three people in this room is behind the attempt to kill you. Which one?"

Arthur's mouth twitched and he put his hand to his chest. Baxter was afraid the little man was going to keel over from heart failure.

"Oh, no," he said. "It couldn't be. My wife—my cousin—his fiancée! Oh, no—it couldn't be."

Baxter laughed. The fierce heat of his temper had burned out, but he was still sore. Sore, and disgusted. Slowly he turned to Sandra.

She was holding the mask and her thin fingers stroked the cold plastic cheeks. Again, as a few minutes ago, the green of her dress showed through the eyeholes with a bright venom. He looked at her eyes and then at the empty sockets of the mask. The cold deadliness of the death mask was pleasanter. It flashed across Baxter's mind that Sandra Claiborne intended to kill her husband and was working up to it with some complicated plan designed to put her in the clear.

"It's a nice family," he said acidly, "but you better not eat together or somebody'll get poisoned. Excuse me while I make a phone call."

He went out to the entrance hall. The chauffeur, the button-eyed butler and a pair of maids were standing there and whispering. Baxter picked up the phone.

"Police headquarters," he said.

Arthur came running out. "You mustn't call them, Mr. Baxter. I don't want this known—particularly if you're right. I hired you to keep it quiet. The nuisance—the publicity—"

Baxter shooed him away and said to the telephone: "Give me Captain Arnaud."

"If you'll only wait!" pleaded Arthur. "I'll explain—I'll—"

"Privacy!" snapped Baxter. "Somebody's loose with a machine gun, and all you're worried about is privacy. For what? Afraid somebody'll catch you picking your toe nails?" Arthur started to speak again, but Baxter drowned him out.

"You hired me, and I'm going through with this. Because even if you want to play the victim in a murder case, I've got a reputation to think of and I keep my clients healthy. What are you trying to pull—a fancy way of committing suicide?"

Then Arnaud's voice answered him. Baxter said: "Baxter speaking. I'm up at the Claiborne place and somebody fired shots through a window. . . . No, nobody hurt. The guy had a lousy aim, but he made noise and there's an ordinance against it. Send up a squad, and be sure there's a ballistic man and somebody who can give the paraffin test to see who fired a gun recently. . . . Yeah. I think he's still around, but I can't pick him out of a hat, can I? And be fast, or Claiborne'll raise the roof."

Baxter had a feeling that the butler's button-eyes were trying to slice through his back, but Baxter was all wrong. Because, when he turned around, he wasn't a bit worried about the eyes. It was the gun that bothered him.

Baxter just grinned. "What's the trouble? Afraid you can't pass the paraffin test?"

The butler growled: "Shut up, and, march into that closet next to the stairs."

Baxter didn't move. "What happened to your manners?" he demanded. "You get good money to be polite."

The butler glowered. "Get into that closet, or I'll plug you cold."

Normally, Baxter would have obeyed the butler and the law of self-preservation. But with Sandra there, he had to play up and be a

hero.

He stared hard at the button-eyes. "Drop that gun," he snapped. Sandra let out an exclamation, but the button-eyes went hard and glittery.

Baxter knew the look, but he also figured that he'd get wounded and Sandra would spend all her days at the hospital. And he was sorry he'd suspected her.

For a fat man, Pat moved quietly. And for a fat man, he packed a wallop. It caught Baxter on the skull and slapped him off his feet.

The blow didn't knock him out, but he had sense enough to pretend it did. The butler went through the door like a streak. Baxter jerked his legs, climbed to his knees and then flopped again, because the butler was starting a car outside and Sandra was bending over Baxter and making sympathetic noises.

He leaned toward her. A scent like the Garden of Allah, with music, floated into his nostrils. Her arm was around his head. He leaned his cheek against her, opened his eyes and winked. She didn't move.

Pat said: "Throw a glass of water in his face, Sandy. It's better than those soft looks."

She got up immediately and Baxter sighed. Pat glanced down at him. "That butler's been with us for years. Going to be a damn nuisance replacing him. He knew all our habits. Never let me run out of caviar."

"Save the caviar for your epitaph," remarked Baxter. "You may need one."

Pat shrugged. "What would anybody want to kill me for?"

"I can think of plenty of good reasons."

"Don't," said Pat, feelingly.

CHAPTER II

MURDER AT THE MASQUERADE

IN HIS office the next morning, Baxter reviewed the case for the benefit of the blonde, who was his secretary. She sat quietly

while Baxter tried to make up his mind whether her legs were as good at Sandra's. It was a tough question to decide without seeing the two together, which Baxter fervently hoped he never would. Because each of them was something very, very special.

"No trace of the butler," said Baxter. "Arnaud's combing the town for him, but no luck so far. What I don't understand is why that machine gun wasn't found. The police searched the grounds and the house and didn't find a thing. The empty cartridge cases were there, of course, but what happened to the gun?"

"Whoever fired it took it away with him. Just because that butler held you up and then ran off doesn't prove that the paraffin test was his real reason."

"Look," said Baxter. "Tommy-gun—makes it a professional job, see! Butlers can't walk into the dime store and buy them. And you can't borrow one from a friend for the evening. And even if you did, you wouldn't know how to handle it. But the guy behind the trigger did a nice clean job. Ever hear of a professional machine gunner without a getaway car?"

The blonde was still unconvinced. "You make so many difficulties. The only important thing is to find out who's trying to kill whom."

"I wish I knew. Pat fired at me, but a few minutes later he saved my life. So either it was a mistake or else he was really shooting at Sandra."

"Why Sandra?"

Baxter shook his head. He was all mixed up.

"Suppose," said the blonde, "that Perkins, the butler, was getting ready to make an extortion demand and was trying to scare them first."

"I couldn't wait around for a guy as slow as all that. Besides, he saw me come in and he wouldn't pull anything while I was there. Unnecessary risk to take. He'd wait."

"But Sandra? Where does she come in?"

"She made them hire me, so she ought to be clean. Here's the day's work, Blonde. I'll find out all I can about the mask and about Perkins. I'll wire North and get a case history of Sandra, and I'll see if anyone around town borrowed a machine gun. That'll keep me busy. You take the Claibornes and Ruth Mae Crittenden. See what the police and the newspapers know."

"And then what? You're just fishing around. Don't forget your chief job is to protect Arthur."

"I'll do that tonight, at the ball. They're exclusive affairs. The public is allowed to sit up in the balcony and watch, but nobody except a millionaire, a first family or a Baxter can get in on the ground floor."

"I think I'll go, too," said the blonde. "If it's as exclusive as all that, I really should."

"Sorry, Blonde, but looks won't get you past the door tonight. I had to do plenty persuading to get permission for myself, and even so, it's just to protect Arthur. I'd have to live here two generations before I'd really rate, and by then my beard would be too long. So you'll have to sit up in the peanut gallery."

"I love to throw peanuts," said the blonde. But she looked as if she'd prefer throwing bombs.

Baxter was in and out of the office all day, and he missed Sandra's three calls. But the blonde gave him the messages. *Get Arthur out of town.*

Baxter tried to do it by telephone, but Arthur had his heart set on tonight's brawl. Besides, he claimed it was the safest place he could be. And in a way, it was. He had a thousand dollars' worth of Baxter for his guardian angel, and he'd look like everybody else around. Except that his knees would probably knock together.

IT WAS nine o'clock when Baxter got back to his apartment in the French Quarter. It had been a big day, and it might be a bigger

night. He had to get into a costume with a blonde wig and pretend he was a Viking. He was willing to drink like one, but he objected to the bare knees. He felt like a cross between a Norse hero and a boy scout. Still, if that was the way to have a good time, he was willing.

The police had found no trace of Perkins, the butler, or the machine gun, and neither had Baxter. But he had uncovered one or two things that were worth remembering.

First and most important, Sandra had the money in the family. Perkins had been her personal property and had come down the river from Ohio with her when she'd married a Claiborne. The money had originally been her brother's, but shortly before her marriage the brother had been flattened out by a hit-and-run driver, identity still unknown.

The mask had been made from a sample in Arthur's collection. As a member of the costume committee, he had submitted a face to the costumer and all the faces had come from that one. The finished product was equipped with a horse-shoe shaped mustache, and when Baxter put the mask on it didn't look so bad.

It couldn't change expression, of course, and when he spoke, the tongue movement combined with the immovable lips was a little queer, but he supposed that was just because he was used to his own face.

Baxter tucked his gun inside his belt, where the tunic hid it well enough, but where it was awkward to get at. But he couldn't reach his usual shoulder holster under a front of imitation armor, and even if the gun slipped around to the seat of his pants, which it had a tendency to do, he was still one up on the party.

He took a cab down to the auditorium where the parade wound up. He waited for the fourth float, which was a dragon with a half dozen Vikings escorting it. He picked a little bouncing Viking and a slow fat one and took them into a huddle. He put his arms around them and made them speak before he was sure

they were Pat and Arthur.

"Just wanted to let you know I was on the job," said Baxter.

His hands slid down their backs and marked them for identification with a couple of pieces of chalk. Which was the chief reason he'd gotten so affectionate.

The ball opened with a grand march, led by the king and queen of the ball and their attendants. Baxter watched from behind a curtain, and then asked an usher to find Mrs. Arthur Claiborne.

It was a stag affair. The great stage of the auditorium had been cut down to the level of the orchestra pit and the entire area was used for dancing. Only men were permitted behind the curtains, where the great secret was a couple of bars. The women sat around the dance floor and had to wait for ushers to call them out and bring them to their partners.

Baxter had his helmet and mask off when Sandra arrived. She seemed feverish and excited, and he wanted to carry her off into the night and be a real Viking.

"You didn't make Arthur stay away," she accused him.

"He's safe enough. You don't have to be upset."

"I'm frightened," she said.

He put his hands on her bare shoulders. He could feel her muscles tense. For a moment she stayed rigid, then she swayed forward. Baxter leaned down and kissed her.

"Arthur's safe enough, if you still want him," he said. "But I can't find out who's after him when all of you hold out on me."

"What do you want to know?" she asked.

"Who killed your brother," said Baxter. "It wasn't really an accident, was it?"

"Who told you that?"

"Nobody. Just answer my question."

"Tomorrow I'll tell you everything. But it was an accident. I was there, too. We were walking along the road, about eight of us. Arthur and my brother were in front. It happened so fast. Please—don't make me

think of it now.”

“Perkins was your butler for years, before you were married. You took him over with your trousseau, and if he had a reason for breaking windows and then running away, you know what it is.”

“He was trying to protect me.”

“From what? You can’t hold out on me, Sandra. There’s murder around tonight.”

“If there is, what are you going to do about it?”

He grinned and took out his gun. She jumped away. “Don’t!” she exclaimed.

THAT was when a masked Viking walked by. He saw Baxter, Sandra and the gun, and he stopped as if he wanted to interfere. Baxter put away the gun and stared. Without a word, the Viking moved on.

Sandra shook her head. “Please,” she said wearily. “I’m so tired. Tomorrow I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

Baxter was still holding the mask in his hand. She glanced away from him and tried to smile, but her eyes fastened on the mask and the look of terror crossed them.

Baxter said: “It was cast from a death mask, wasn’t it?”

She nodded. He gripped her arm and said: “Whose?” But he knew the answer even before she spoke.

“My brother’s,” she said. She seemed limp and wavering.

Baxter leaned down and kissed her again. When he let her go, she was in no condition to answer any questions. Nor he to ask.

He stayed in the corridor between the bar and the dance floor and watched the world stagger by. He concluded that it couldn’t hold its liquor.

Occasionally he sighted his chalk marks on the Claiborne backs, and when the music was playing he picked them out on the dance floor and watched like a hawk. Ever since the idea of a masked murderer had hit him, he’d been obsessed with it. The setup was too

perfect.

By the fifth dance, a few of the Vikings were shagging. Except that they were liable to sweat themselves out of their armor if they weren’t careful, the shagging seemed to be all right. Baxter was glued to his curtain, watching a little Norse guy with a chalk mark on his back. Arthur was dancing with his wife, and Baxter was wondering if he could cut in.

His mustache itched under his mask and he couldn’t rub it. The same face kept passing him but it was always a different guy. He hoped Arnaud would hurry up and catch his butler, because if Perkins was still loose on Carnival day he could roam the city in a mask and do whatever he damn pleased. Which was probably knocking off a Claiborne.

A hand dropped on Baxter’s shoulder and he whirled. The Viking with the composition face looked like any other Viking, but his words weren’t.

“What’s the trouble, Baxter?” he asked. “Jumpy?”

“Who are you?” demanded Baxter. Either the guy was a student of knees, or he’d spotted Baxter earlier in the evening and watched him ever since.

“I’m just a friend of the Claibornes, and I heard you were working for them. I got a tip for you, Baxter.”

“Let’s have it.”

“Perkins, the Claiborne butler who ran away. He’s here tonight.”

“How do you know?”

“Same way I knew you. By his face.”

Baxter took a deep breath. “Listen,” he said. “I’m a snob. I don’t talk to people unless I know who they are.”

“If you go to the side entrance—south side—and wait, you ought to find Perkins. He’ll be masked, but he’ll be leaving early. And nobody else will leave ahead of time except maybe the drunks.”

Baxter reached for the man’s helmet to rip it off, but an arm thrust out and shoved him back. He rocked on his heels and then flung

himself forward. But he had to stop before he got clear of the curtains, because the guy had stepped out onto the dance floor and was in sight of hundreds of people.

Baxter drew back into hiding. A friend of Pat or Arthur might easily have heard of Perkins' disappearance, but if he was playing the game straight he'd notify the police or a Claiborne. And there was the question of how the guy had identified Baxter.

Baxter watched. The guy had spoken to an usher and now he was standing on the edge of the dance floor and waiting for somebody. Presently she came. Ruthie Mae Crittenden, the big redhead, looking like forbidden fruit. The Viking held out his arms and they started to dance. Her wide mouth split into a smile.

Anybody could have spotted Baxter the time he'd had a drink in the bar, when naturally he'd taken off his mask. But anybody would have lost him in the shuffle unless he'd kept watching.

Baxter's eyes never left the redhead. The guy with her was steering her carefully across the floor, in the direction of Sandra and Arthur. When they came alongside, the redhead spoke and Sandra turned around and laughed. The two couples stayed close together and kept up some kind of a chatter. And then the lights went out.

THE murmur of surprise never even got started. Baxter, still looking in the direction of the two couples, saw nothing for an instant. Then the jet of flame lanced out and the shot exploded. In the reverberating echo, he heard the clatter of a dropped gun.

Baxter felt sick. The thing he'd foreseen and been afraid of had happened, and he hadn't done anything about it. The murderer had tried the simplest of tricks to get rid of Baxter, and even though Baxter hadn't fallen for it, he'd done nothing to prevent the killing.

So Arthur was dead, and Pat was the logical suspect. And meantime Baxter keyed

up his hearing and tried to pick out the sound of running feet.

He yelled, "Lights!" and then Ruthie Mae let out a scream that for sheer power could have gotten her a job as a human air-raid siren.

Baxter stayed exactly where he was. There were two exits from the ballroom, and he commanded one of them. The murderer had thrown away his gun and he might simply mingle with the crowd and gamble on the general mix-up. Like all the other Vikings, he'd been wearing gloves and there was no danger of fingerprints or paraffin tests.

On the other hand, the killer might make a break for it. He had a choice of two exits from the ballroom and then maybe a half dozen from the auditorium itself.

Baxter counted up to ten, then raced across the floor and hoped he'd find the other exit. He slapped into somebody and knocked him clean off his feet. He heard curses and a groan, and then he barged into somebody else.

Baxter grabbed the helmet and a tenor voice muttered: "Let go, you—"

It wasn't the voice of the guy who'd told him about Perkins, so Baxter shoved and kept on. He saw a slit of light where the exit was. A figure whisked across it, leaving the ballroom. Baxter put on speed.

He pounded through the corridor and broke through into a smoking room. The lights were on here, and the door beyond was open. Baxter lammed through it.

He was in a cement hallway that wasn't being used tonight, because the only light came from a bulb just beyond a turn. And a shadowy silhouette stood between him and the patch of light.

The guy heard Baxter, whirled and dropped into a crouch. Baxter, cannonading at full speed, couldn't stop or dodge or maneuver. All he could do was keep going and add his own momentum to the power of a fist booming up.

Five yards away, Baxter jumped. He drew up his feet like a broad-jumper's and snapped them forward. His shoes hit first. The guy went over and Baxter smashed down on top of him, caromed and banged his shoulder against the concrete wall.

Baxter's gun fell out of his pants and got lost somewhere. His head jerked and smacked the wall. He wasn't out, but he was in pitch darkness.

A fist hit him. Blindly, Baxter flailed back. Then he realized that his mask had twisted so that the eye slits were over on his cheeks. And the helmet was shoved down so that the whole business was jammed and knotted, and there wasn't a chance of tearing it loose.

He swung wildly, bashed his knuckles against the concrete and then hit bone. He leapt clear, found the wall and slid along it to the turn. He whirled around and then went to work on his mask. Somebody else was there.

A voice said "Gregg?" Baxter grunted and tried to get his mask free. A hand gripped his arm and the voice said: "Come on—worry about that later."

CHAPTER III

GUN GREETING FOR A FUGITIVE

BAXTER let the man guide him. The Viking he'd tangled with must be out cold, and somebody would come along and find him. The scrap must have made noise and the gang in the smoking room would come out and look.

As for Baxter, he'd apparently landed dead center in the murder nest, but as long as he kept his mask on, they wouldn't know who he was.

And anyhow, he didn't have much choice. Because, if he objected now, they'd find out he was the wrong turkey and maybe they'd plug him right off.

He stumbled on steps and the guy caught him. "How'd it happen?" he demanded. "Who

went after you?"

"Some mug took a flying tackle and my mask got jammed. He's out cold, but—jeez! It was close."

The grip on his arm tightened and Baxter was rushed across pavement and then told to step up. His foot felt a runningboard, and he was half lifted, half flung into the rear of a car. The motor was already running and the machine whined as the driver shot forward.

The man next to Baxter said: "Gregg never came out."

"This mug," said the voice next to Baxter, "came running out. His mask slipped so he couldn't see. I thought it was Gregg until he spoke. By that a time, it was too late. I didn't want to go back and look for trouble, so I just took what I had and brought it along."

"Jeez!" was all the driver had to say.

Baxter reached for the side of his head and tried to unknot the lace that held his mask. A hand ripped on his fingers and the voice next to him said: "Take that mask off and your life isn't worth the price of admission to that shindig. Which was free. Now start talking. How the hell did you get here and what happened to Gregg?"

"How do I know? Think I came along for love? I heard a shot, and that hall was no place for me. I started running, and then I bumped into somebody who maybe was Gregg and maybe was Gunga Din. We didn't have time to discuss it. We just tangled. My mask got twisted, and I socked out and landed a wild one. I got up and started to lam, and then you took charge. I suggest we call it quits before we get to telling secrets."

Baxter wasn't in the mood for any high-pressure detection, because if he found out who they were, then they'd find out who he was and he might never see Sandra again. Or anyone else, either.

The driver barked suddenly: "Joe, maybe this guy's Baxter!"

Joe nudged Baxter. "Well," he snarled, "are you?"

Baxter took his time before speaking. "Who's Baxter?" he asked.

For answer he got a slap in the mask. "If you're trying to pull a fast one," said Joe, "I'll knock your damn block off!"

Baxter shrugged. They weren't going to take his mask off because then he'd see them and could identify them. And they didn't like not unmasking him, because maybe he was Baxter and would make trouble later on. It was nice to let someone else have all the worries.

The car went on for about twenty minutes of pained silence, and then stopped. There were no traffic noises, and Baxter judged they were somewhere out in the country.

"We got to make up our minds," said the driver. "We can't take this guy around with us, and we can't drop him off and let him go home."

"Why not?" asked Baxter. "What could I tell anybody?"

Joe said, wearily: "I guess we got to bump him."

"Don't be a damn fool!" raged Baxter. "The worst I can do is go straight to the cops and tell 'em that two guys that I can't identify were waiting outside the auditorium in a car I never saw. They drove me out of town and then found out I was the wrong guy, so they turned me loose."

"You don't know what we were waiting for, huh?" said Joe. "You couldn't guess."

"If your boy friend gets nabbed and squeals, the cops'll catch up to you; if he gets away, they never will. You want a murder rap on you, just for a souvenir? You cheap stooges—if I was you, I'd give myself a ham sandwich and five bucks taxi fare just to create a little good will. I'd be so damn glad I picked up a guy that didn't like coppers, that I'd drop in on my favorite bar and have three fast drinks to my luck.

"Look at me—I been tied up in this damn thing for a half hour and my nose itches. The only memory I got is a couple of voices. Let

me hear 'em say something nice, and I'll go home and sleep through the Carnival."

The driver said: "Maybe he's right, Joe."

Joe made a gurgling sound and Baxter heard him open the door of the car and then felt cool air on his knees.

Joe said: "Get up, you."

Baxter got up. Metal crashed on the back of his head and a foot booted him in the rear. The wig and the tin helmet saved him, but he went stumbling over the running board and pitched flat.

HE LAY there, tugging frantically at his mask and listening to the sound of the motor race away. But the knots had worked tight and the mask had wedged fast on his head. By the time he got it off, he didn't even see tail lights, much less a set of license numbers.

He stood up slowly. He was shivering a little, partly because he was rattled and partly because here he was out in the open country with no clothes except a kind of fancy track suit with short skirts.

He figured it was just one more piece of evidence that the history books taught you all wrong, because if Vikings had really dressed like this they'd have frozen to death the first long winter, instead of getting famous. And if they'd really fought as much as Baxter had been told, it wasn't because they were a brave race or any better than the next bunch, Hell no! They'd just fought to keep warm.

He saw the dark, blurred outline of a couple of houses and he had to solve the problem of getting clothes without being shot at for a ghost or a burglar. He took off his tinsel and stripped to his underwear before he walked up the path of the nearest house and rang the bell.

He stood there shivering and listening to the jangling inside for about a minute. Then a window opened and an old man with white hair and a whisky complexion leaned out.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"I been robbed. Somebody took my clothes and my car and I'm freezing. I want to use your phone."

The old man stared and then apparently decided that underwear and danger didn't go together. He said, "I'll be down," and slammed the window.

He had an extra blanket with him when he opened the door. Baxter wrapped it around himself, said, "Thanks," and went straight for the telephone.

Just for luck, he tried his office first. The blonde's brains were working tonight, because she was right there waiting for his call.

"Hello," he said. "I'm stuck out in the suburbs without my clothes. Can you get my car, stop off at my place for a suit and come straight out?"

"Is anybody listening?" she asked.

"Not unless you yell loud enough."

She dropped her voice. "You're in trouble, because the stupidest thing you ever did in your life was to run away. Arnaud was so mad he forgot to have me followed when I left the auditorium. So just keep under cover and I'll be out as soon as I can, but I can't risk going to your apartment and so I won't guarantee the suit will fit."

"What happened?" he asked.

"I'll tell you when I get out there. I don't like staying here any longer than I have to. And besides, it'll make you that much more impatient to see me."

"Thanks, darling," said Baxter. "You're always so nice to me."

He hung up thoughtfully. "That was my wife," he said to the old man.

He pulled the blanket around his shoulders and the old man began plying him with questions. Wasn't he going to call the police? How had it happened? Where? When? What did they look like?

Baxter gave plausible answers and wondered what kind of trouble he was in now and whether Arthur had been killed or just wounded. Apparently Gregg had escaped, or

Baxter wouldn't be in hot water. Sandra would be mad at him, too, for not taking care of her husband. And she'd warned him plenty.

He wondered how the papers would play it up. The world was no worse off without Arthur, but somebody could write a nice story about how a guy named Baxter put a chalk mark on the back of his client with the result that a gunman had no trouble picking him out. It was a story Baxter would probably be hearing the rest of his life.

IT TOOK the blonde almost an hour to get out. She rang the bell and said she was his wife and looked beautiful and defiant when she said it. She handed him some clothes and Baxter went into the next room to change.

The clothes had been built for a man with a pot belly, and she'd forgotten suspenders and belt. Baxter did the best he could with a piece of string that he detached from the curtains. It wasn't the nicest way to thank the old man, but Baxter couldn't hold up his pants with one hand. Maybe some day he'd be back and thank the old man properly, with a bottle.

The blonde made up for him, however. She behaved like a duchess and had the old man feeling grateful for the honor of having helped. But Baxter was still irritable, chiefly because of the pants.

"Well?" he said, as soon as they were out in the car. "What's it all about? I beat it as soon as I heard the shot and I almost caught the whole gang. If my mask hadn't got jammed, I probably would have. What kind of trouble am I in?"

He started the car and drove leisurely. The blonde said, quietly: "They all seem to think you killed her."

Baxter stopped the car. "Her?" he said.

"Of course. But I forgot you didn't even know. She was killed. The bullet was fired at point-blank range."

"Her?" repeated Baxter.

"Yes. Don't you understand? Mrs. Arthur Claiborne."

“Jeez!” said Baxter. He hadn’t expected that.

He reached in his pocket for a cigarette, but the pockets were empty. Then he said, “Got a cigarette?” and forgot that the blonde never smoked. She opened the glove compartment where he always kept a spare package.

“I didn’t know you felt that way about her,” said the blonde. She bit her lips.

Baxter’s hand shook as he lit up. He was glad that at least he hadn’t had to look at her body. He wondered who’d want to kill a girl like Sandra, who’d never harmed anybody in her life. Or maybe she had. Maybe just looking at her harmed people, the way it had harmed Baxter.

He kept telling himself that if he’d known it was Sandra, he’d have ripped off his mask and torn that pair apart. They’d have killed him for it, but he’d have gotten two for one.

“Tell me what happened.”

“I was up in the gallery when the lights went out. I heard the shot and then that female clown with red hair began yelling. I had a feeling you were involved, and I raced downstairs. Mrs. Claiborne was lying there, and all those people with masks were looking at her. It was horrible.”

“Save the details,” remarked Baxter.

“Well, they started blocking off the exits, and somebody called the police and everybody was saying that an outsider must have gotten in, because nobody who was supposed to be at the ball could possibly have killed her.”

“Sure,” said Baxter. He started the car and drove slowly. A rage smoldered in him but he tried to control it.

“Then Ruth Mae told her story. She was supposed to have been dancing with Pat, but somebody else showed up and said Pat was a little drunk and was sitting it out in the bar. Pat doesn’t care for dancing, anyhow.

“Well, at first Ruthie Mae thought she was dancing with you, but the man said she

wasn’t. It’s hard to recognize a voice through a mask, and she really wasn’t sure whether it was you or not. Then they sighted the Claibornes and danced alongside and began kidding.

“When the lights went out, Ruthie Mae’s partner grabbed a gun. She tried to knock it out of his hand just as he fired, and she must have spoilt his aim. That’s why Sandra was killed instead of Arthur.”

“And that’s Arnaud’s theory? That it was all a mistake?”

“Yes. You mean—” The blonde sat back and let it sink in. Then she finished her account.

“Well, they started looking for you and you’d gone. Nobody knew where. Then a man told a story of how he’d seen you and Sandra earlier that evening, and you were threatening her with a gun and she was saying, ‘Don’t.’ Did that really happen?”

Baxter recalled the tableau, when Sandra had asked him how he was protecting Arthur and Baxter had drawn a gun. It added up.

“It happened,” he said, “except that I wasn’t threatening her. Tell me how Pat and Arthur behaved.”

“Arthur got hysterical and had to be treated for shock. Pat just stood there and shook all over. I never saw a man cry that way.”

“He probably ran out of caviar,” said Baxter. “They didn’t find a bruised chin lying near one of the exits, did they?”

“No. Who would that be?”

“A man named Gregg. He’s wanted for the murder of Sandra Claiborne.” Baxter explained briefly. “I think I’ll stay clear of Arnaud and do my own investigating. I’ll have to lay low most of tomorrow, but the day after that is Carnival and I can go all over town in a mask. It’s a field day for wanted men.

“I’ll run into you on Canal, in front of the office. Dress up as a Swiss yodeler, but be sure and wear short skirts so that I can recognize you. This looks like my stop. Good

night, Blonde. Don't take any new cases."

HE BOUGHT sleep at a cheap hotel in the downtown section, but it was a long time before he cashed in on his purchase. Whatever Sandra had been ready to tell him, he'd never learn. Not from her, anyhow.

It was late when he woke up, and even before he opened his eyes he was aware that somebody else was in the room. He rolled over slowly and looked.

Perkins' flat face was drawn; his button eyes, small and tired, stared hypnotically over the long barrel of a thirty-eight.

"Why did you do it?" he demanded in a cold, choked voice.

"Do what?" asked Baxter.

He sensed that Perkins' nerves were close to breaking, that a single quick gesture would set up a trigger reflex. Perkins, hunted and haggard, tense from his long wait, was ready to pour fire just for the relief of the noise.

"Do what?" repeated Baxter quietly. It was a lousy way to wake up.

"Why did you kill Miss Sandra?"

Baxter yawned with his mouth and lumped with his stomach. Somehow he had to make the butler quiet down.

"I didn't," he observed. "Would you be a good guy and sew up my pants? They don't fit."

Perkins' face twisted into a hard, bitter caricature. "You killed her!" he barked hoarsely. "You knew her before—you went straight to her room that night—you—" He stopped suddenly and his eyes began to roll.

Baxter tensed. The guy was going to have a fit and he was clean out of his mind. The gun jerked up, wavered.

"I liked her," said Baxter calmly. "I was a little in love with her, from the first moment I ever saw her. That's why I walked into her room."

Perkins' breathing came like the hiss of an animal. His lips tightened up and the gun

steadied. He raised his other hand and wiped sweat from his forehead.

"You're a pot-bellied, brainless ape!" snapped Baxter. "Where in the hell did you get the idea I killed her?"

It worked. The razor-sharp edge of the butler's nerves blunted with the first rush of feeling. He was still dangerous, still ready to kill, but he was human again and his brain reacted to reason.

"The papers," he stammered. "They said so."

"The papers say what some damn reporter got out of a cop who was trying not to give any information. You ought to know that. Do you believe what the papers say about you?"

"Yes," said the butler.

"Nuts! You got rattled the other night and beat it, and I'm still wondering why. Maybe you fired the pistol shot, but how about the machine gun? Where in hell would you get hold of a chopper?"

"From a tree."

Baxter sank back on his pillow. Last night two guys wanted to bump him because he hadn't killed Sandra, and now this tomato wanted to do the same thing for the opposite reason. And to top it off, the guy believed machine guns grew on trees.

If the world was getting to be like that, maybe Baxter was better off dead. Except that he hated to go where he couldn't take his mustache. It was sort of a good luck charm.

Perkins grinned mildly. "It sounds queer when I say it like that. But Miss Sandra had asked me to fire a shot through the window. I'd have done anything for her. I was always in the family, you see.

"She wanted to frighten someone, though naturally she didn't confide in me. She had drawn the sketch on the shade so that I could fire and be certain I'd hit nothing but the plaster cast. It was a game she used to play with me when she was a child."

"With real bullets?"

“With a pop-gun that fired a cork. This was the first time I ever did it with real bullets. But I was expert with the pop-gun.”

“Sure,” said Baxter. “Now about the machine gun in the tree. Explain that one.”

“I went out and saw someone pulling it down from the tree. I must have made some noise and frightened him, for he left immediately. But it was at the spot from which I had planned to fire, and when I got there I found a long pole with a hook. The machine gun was hidden in the tree, attached to a rope with a spring arrangement so that it could be jerked back into the branches. I’d never fired a machine gun before, and I couldn’t resist.”

The story was crazy enough to be true. Nobody’d make one up like that.

Baxter said: “If that’s straight, why not go to the police and tell ‘em?”

“They’d arrest me. They’d put me in jail for firing those shots.”

“You fired them—sure. So you’re going to be a fugitive from justice the rest of your life?”

Perkins frowned, and Baxter followed up. “Go to Arnaud and tell him you saw me. Tell him about the machine gun and how you used it to protect Sandra. All Arnaud wants right now is me. He’s a good guy, sometimes, and your only chance of clearing yourself is to play fair, and do it quick. Once he catches up with me and the machine gun it’ll be too late. You’ll be just another bum that held out on him.”

“I’ll think it over,” said Perkins.

“And one more thing. You were around when Sandra’s brother was killed, weren’t you? Did she ever hint that it was no accident?”

“Certainly not,” declared the butler. “It was a very unfortunate affair. Nobody knew exactly what happened. The headlights flashed in their eyes and the car almost ran down some of the others in the party.”

“So that was it,” said Baxter.

He had a lot of time for thinking that day. He divided it up into beers and stayed in hiding. He wished he could go out and talk to some Claibornes, but he couldn’t risk it. Not with the police looking for him.

He began to see daylight in the case. The machine gun in the tree. Sandra’s fear and her wildcat scheme with Perkins. The death of her brother years ago. It all added up.

Baxter told himself he had good ideas but no evidence, and he tackled the next beer.

It was a long day, and by the end of it the papers said nothing about the butler. From which, Baxter concluded that Perkins had failed to surrender himself to Arnaud.

CHAPTER IV

DEATH’S-HEAD BOOMERANG

ON MARDI GRAS, the town goes wild. Half the population dresses up in costumes and masks, and the other half watches. The long route of the parade is so jammed that a nimble-footed kid could march on the tops of the heads and sidestep all the bald spots without ever touching pavement.

Long lines of maskers string through the crowds. The number of people lost exceeds the total population by at least ten per cent. The police do nothing about it; it’s their carnival, too.

It starts with the ceremonial arrival of the King of Carnival. He disembarks from the river, and the whistles and horns and bells of the city give their all. He heads the parade and sits on a sumptuous float.

Behind him come the bands and the trucks, which are hired by individual groups who decorate the trucks and finish them off with a bar and an occasional jazz band. And, for reasons patented by the local government, it never rains.

The trucks were parked in the side streets off upper St. Charles. Pirates and Romans, knights and peasants stepped out of cars,

adjusted their masks and headed for their respective floats. Slowly the head of the parade formed.

But amongst all the groups who were similarly costumed, there was only one devil. He was dressed completely in black, from the black hood over his head down to his shiny black shoes. His mask covered his entire face, and the eyes that gleamed through the two slits were dark and angry.

He walked up and down the side streets and answered all the wise cracks with a sullen, reckless humor. People stared at him as he passed.

He was striding down the third street, still looking and still not finding what he was after. When he saw a couple of pirates, he deliberately crossed the street and went past the buccaneer float. It was one of the most elaborate he had seen.

He doubled back and approached the truck immediately behind; and spotted the driver. The devil approached him leisurely.

"You following that pirate outfit?"

The driver glanced up. "Yeah. What about it?"

The devil had a pocket and he took a ten-dollar bill out of it. "Follow close and let me sit next to you."

The driver stood up and his fingers clutched at the bill. "Sure. But what is this? A gag?"

"It's a good way to take the parade," was the answer. "And I like parades."

The truck driver rumbled the bill and then stared at the devil. The devil was an unknown quantity, but the bill wasn't.

"Sure, bud, if that's what you want. But it ain't what it's cracked up to be. Just sitting in a car—you'll get tired of it."

"When I do," said the devil, "I'll hop off." He sat down on the grass and stretched out.

It was almost an hour before the floats got under way. The pirates were doing it up right. They had a piano and a bartender aboard, and the favors they flung out to the crowds along

the streets were a little better, a little more expensive than the general run.

BUT the devil wasn't interested in souvenirs. His dark, blazing eyes were fixed on a big, portly pirate who sat down solidly in a chair on the pirate deck, opened a small jar of caviar and tasted it.

Presently a woman approached him and said something. She, too, was dressed as a pirate. She wore a mask that concealed the upper part of her face, and a tattered hat covered her hair completely. But her mouth was wide and brightly painted, and she seemed angry.

Shortly the bartender approached the pair and offered a tray of drinks. He was costumed and he, too, wore a mask, but his servile manner was far from piratical. He carried himself more like a butler than a buccaneer. In fact, he behaved like a very particular butler.

The devil let out a low whistle from behind his mask. He seemed to grow taut, and his right hand slipped inside the folds of his costume. The costume was bulky, and the full, black cloak buried the movement of his hand.

But underneath, his fingers stroked the butt of the gun that was strapped close to his body. He kept his hand there, for he was obsessed with the certainty of something about to happen.

Pat Claiborne, Ruthie Mae and Perkins. The mixture was explosive.

Slowly, the floats moved through the crowds. The parade was in the business section now. People yelled and cheered, and when the parade was held up for a few minutes the masqueraders exchanged wisecracks with the mob.

But Perkins calmly mixed drinks behind his bar and then passed them out; Pat Claiborne leaned back in his chair and stared at the sky; and Ruthie Mae kept speaking to him, her lips moving in quick urgency. She wasn't drinking.

The devil kept glancing from her to the

crowd, and then to the loaded balconies. Arthur ought to be home mourning, but on the other hand he might have slipped out and tended to some business. You couldn't tell. All you could do was sit next to a truck driver and watch. And hope that nothing would happen. Or, if it did, that you'd be looking at the right place at the right time.

The driver tried to make conversation, but the devil was in a hell of a mood. No holiday spirit. The driver began to be sorry he'd taken this guy along.

After a while the driver complained about it. "Listen, you," he said. "You sit there like some damn—"

It was lucky the truck wasn't moving, because the driver would have sat there with his mouth open and let the float roll. As it was, he was hardly sure what happened first.

The devil had his hand inside his cloak, and suddenly the cloak rippled and the shots rang out. The devil fired once, at one of the balconies, but three shots sounded. Two of them were close together, and the third came maybe a second later. One of the pirates yelled, and then the devil leaped from the truck and dived at the crowd.

He plunged through and left bruised chests and mashed toes and bad temper behind him. But he had to plow through a solid wall of people. He managed it for about ten or fifteen feet, and then it closed up on him and a tangle of fists battered him down.

Everybody was yelling wildly and the mob began to stampede. Where the devil had gone down, they were fighting wildly. A man with a bloody nose pushed his way out, and suddenly a woman keeled over and fainted.

Then the police came.

There were plenty of them up near the reviewing stand, and a squad marched over and restored order. They found a slightly wounded pirate and about a half dozen mildly injured in the throng that had tackled the devil, but there was no sign of the devil himself.

There was just his great, hooded cloak at

the bottom of the pile. He might be anybody in the crowd, for nobody had seen his face.

The police were at a loss to account for the episode. It seemed that somebody up in a balcony had fired, and the devil had fired back and spoiled the man's aim. But when the police searched the house, they found nobody they could arrest. One woman had seen a gun poke from a window. The arm that held it had been part of a domino costume. That was all.

BAXTER moved slowly through the crowd and headed for Canal. He'd left the devil's cloak behind him, and he'd gotten out of the affair with a couple of cheek bruises and a skinned knuckle. He was still costumed and masked, for underneath his cloak he had worn the close fitting pants and jacket of a Swiss mountaineer.

He'd been a damn fool to bang through the crowd like that, but he'd figured he had a chance, and that once he got inside the house he'd get his man. Well, he'd been wrong.

It was pure luck he'd seen the gun and that he'd fired at it in time to spoil the guy's aim. But maybe that was too bad, too, because Baxter still wasn't sure who had been the intended victim.

He didn't get the Perkins business, either. Standing on a float and mixing drinks, with a mask over his face, was as good a way to hide out as any other. But if he was managing the bar, Pat and Arthur must have known.

Baxter wandered slowly. The streets were so packed that it took him five minutes to walk a block. At the corner of Canal, the mob was thick and he had to wait ten minutes before he could even move. Then he dawdled on, crossed Canal and let out a yodel.

The yodel caught somebody's imagination and a second voice took it up. A couple of minutes later everybody around Baxter was doing it. He hoped the yodeling would localize itself in his neighborhood, because if it did, he might get a blonde out of it.

She came from nowhere and slipped her

arm through his. He said: "Hello, Blonde. I been lonesome."

"So have I. I have men following me all the time and they won't speak to me. They just go back to Arnaud and snitch. I lost two of them in the crowd just now."

Baxter sighed. "Then we better split. A couple of people from the Alps would be too easy to spot. Anything happen?"

"No. And you?"

"I've got it doped out in this head of mine, and if I'm wrong, I'm going to look up Arnaud and tell him to lock me up in a home for the feebleminded. You might find your escort and let them follow you down to where the parade busts up. Perkins is tending bar on the buccaneer float and Arnaud can have him. But make sure nobody's around when he gets grabbed. He's due for a cell or the morgue before dark. Better run along."

She couldn't even make a face at him, on account of her mask, but Baxter knew the expression. She thought he was taking the excitement and giving her the dirty end, as usual. Well, maybe it would be excitement and maybe it would be just bullets in his spine. How could he know?

A couple of hours later he rang the bell of one of the older buildings in the French Quarter, marched across the miniature courtyard and ascended the balcony stairs. He knocked on the first door.

A woman's voice called out: "Who's there?"

"Just a friend," said Baxter.

He stood there, one hand resting lightly on his chest, the fingers spread and sliding towards the worn leather of his holster. Then the door opened and he lowered his hand.

He said: "Hello, Ruthie."

The redhead blocked the doorway. "Hello, handsome. Who are you?"

Baxter peeled off his mask. "I'm the guy that can't keep away from you. I had a dream about red hair, and then an angel came along and gave me your address."

"Get out!" she said furiously. "Or I'll turn you over to the police."

"All right with me, just as long as I have company. You and Gregg, for instance."

Her whole body stiffened. "Gregg?" she asked. "Who's Gregg?"

"Ruthie, it's all up. You have from now until the time he gets here to talk. Either you spill it now and make it easy for yourself, or else—"

SHE smiled ingratiatingly. Baxter should have guessed, and gone down for a riot squad, but when a woman smiled at him that way he always fell for it.

"Or else what?" she asked. "You sound interesting. Come on in, big boy. I just changed my mind."

"Thanks," said Baxter. He figured she was stalling. He was ready to stall along, too, provided she sat down on the couch with him.

But she didn't. She took the chair facing it, and left him all alone in the world. So he got down to business.

"Why'd they try and kill Perkins?" he asked. "I can't figure that one out."

"This is fantastic!" she exclaimed. "It's even more incredible than Pat and his caviar."

"Listen, Ruthie—you're not so clever. Anybody with half a brain in his head can dope it out. You need a little convincing, so here goes.

"Sandra's brother was run over by a hit-and-run driver. Remember? Well, the whole case starts with just one fact. It was no accident; Arthur pushed him. And married the girl who inherited all the money."

"You mean Sandra?"

"Sure. Sandra. But Arthur didn't exactly get away with it, because somebody knew about it and blackmailed him. Little sums, over a long period of time, until that somebody decided he ought to get a lot more money out of Arthur. The only trouble was that Arthur didn't have it. Sandra did. So Sandra had to be killed."

“But—I thought it was an accident.”

Baxter disregarded the heckling. “It wasn’t a scheme Arthur warmed up to, and so he had to be reminded that he’d better play ball. The blackmailer made him use that death mask of Sandra’s brother for the ball the other night. It was a reminder that kept Arthur in line all right, but it was also the give-away. It brought the whole business back to the hit-and-run incident.

“Once I knew that Sandra was killed on purpose, then everything else was just a build-up to make the shooting look like an accident. And that meant that the story of your trying to prevent the killing was false, too. And that made you an accomplice.

“You helped maneuver the Claibornes into a position where your partner could shoot Sandra as soon as the lights went out. The pair I ran into, in the car, were just hired for the night to provide a getaway. Gregg, of course, was the blackmailer. But for a while I didn’t know who Gregg was.”

“And you know now?” she asked

“Sure. He was the hit-and-run boy, because nobody else would know that Arthur really pushed Sandra’s brother. And he had to be at the Claiborne house, too, because of that machine gun business. Neither Arthur nor Pat would know where to buy one, but a guy with underworld connections would.

“Well, there was only one person I could think of who’d fit the bill. The Claiborne chauffeur. And now, tell me why he tried to get Perkins today.”

Ruth Mae Crittenden stared steadily and didn’t answer. But somebody else did.

“Tell him, Ruthie,” said a voice. “And put your hands up, Baxter.”

Baxter raised them slowly. He hadn’t figured on that. Gregg, listening in the next room. Gregg, walking slowly around the couch and pointing a gun. He was still wearing the domino outfit.

Baxter glared. Gregg was a big dark guy, with a pointed face and a sharp chin. Baxter

should have guessed he’d be here. But no. He’d been too sure of himself, too anxious to shoot off his mouth in front of the redhead. It was one of those dumb oversights that Baxter would never have committed if he hadn’t been so damn anxious to show what a bright boy he was.

Bright boy. Yeah. He knew better now.

“Tell him, Ruthie,” repeated the chauffeur.

She glanced anxiously at Gregg, shrugged, and then said: “Perkins caught us kissing this morning. Near the garage. If the police got him and he told that, they’d start questioning us. It was better to remove him.

“It couldn’t be done at the Claiborne house, but Perkins made it easy by tending bar on the float. He had a special drink that he always made for Mardi Gras, and it was Pat’s idea that Perkins would be safer on the float than anywhere else.”

And Perkins ought to be in Arnaud’s hands right now, and if Arnaud had any sense he’d get hold of everybody, including the redhead, and so maybe the U. S. marines would come and save little boy Baxter. But on the other hand, maybe they wouldn’t.

He stood up, with his arms still raised. “Mind if I smoke?”

“Frisk him, Ruthie,” said Gregg.

She knew how to do it, too. She stood behind him, and found the gun in the holster and removed it. She gave it to Gregg.

BAXTER backed away and lowered his arms. He and Ruthie and Gregg were standing at the points of a triangle, but Ruthie would never be dumb enough to step between the two men. Baxter didn’t even waste time hoping she would.

He took cigarettes out of his pocket. He said: “Sandra must have suspected. Arthur talked in his sleep—he dropped hints—a lap dog like him couldn’t hold out on his wife. So she suspected she was in danger, but she knew somebody was forcing Arthur.

“She tried to save him and herself by

getting him out of town. Then she tried to scare him by making the butler fire through the window." Baxter lit up and stared at the match. "She was quite a dame."

He tossed the match in the general direction of the couch. It was still flaming as it hit the cushions, but Baxter didn't even look. He seemed entirely unaware of what he'd done.

Ruth Mae glanced at him, fearing a trick. Then she cried out, "It's burning!" and she rushed at the wisp of smoke. For an instant, she crossed between Gregg and Baxter.

Baxter didn't look as if he'd been planning on it, but every muscle was tense and ready. He charged, banged into Ruth Mae Crittenden and slapped her against Gregg. Gregg tried to twist his gun around the redhead to get a shot at Baxter. And then Baxter got a grip on the gun, and the three people went toppling over.

Baxter kept hanging onto the gun and struggled to bring up his knee and clamp it down on the gun wrist. The redhead kicked and pummeled, and her long, sharp nails clawed and raked Baxter's cheek. He gritted his teeth and took punishment.

Gregg was wriggling his body and pummeling with his free hand. Baxter, with blood streaming down his face, got a knee on

the gun wrist and applied weight. He kept jabbing with his other hand, and Ruthie jumped on his back and dug her fingers into his throat.

He jerked suddenly and she went rolling off. For an instant her wide, painted mouth gaped at him. Then Baxter's fist crashed on the point of her jaw and she flopped.

Baxter butted down with his head and struck Gregg's stomach. Baxter lifted up, and then hammered his fist at the bony arm that held the gun. Gregg grunted and his fingers relaxed. Baxter swept up the gun, circled it and smashed the butt down on Gregg's skull.

Baxter climbed slowly to his feet. He'd taken a battering and he felt weak and tired.

He stooped and retrieved his own gun and then he sat down on the couch. He saw himself in the mirror, a dark, blood-smeared face with angry black eyes. He didn't like it.

He raised the gun slowly, aimed and fired at himself in the mirror. The explosion roared out. Baxter liked it. It seemed a nice way to get someone to call the cops. And besides, it relieved his feelings.

He fired again, aiming at his eyes that gleamed from the shattered splinters of the mirror.