

When an ice-skating star catches a slug,
Johnny Castle matches wits
with the cops!



I grabbed for the gun that bounced out of Caduro's hand

CREPE for SUZETTE

A Novelet by C. S. MONTANYE

Chapter I

IT WAS one of those warm spring nights when everyone was going somewhere. I sat in a taxi with Libby Hart, bound for the Paladium, a stone's throw from Columbus Circle where a big ice pageant, called *Frozen Follies of the Year*, was due to be unveiled at eight-forty-five.

The star of the hard water carnival was Suzette Darcy. And Libby Hart's interest in the skate opus, I happened to know, had to do with this same Miss Darcy.

Lib's sweatshop, which kept her in alligator shoes and free cosmetics, was known to the trade as Arcady House, manufactured first aids to fading faces. The girl friend did publicity for the outfit, and Arcady House was about to present Miss Suzette Darcy with a cash donation for her signed approval of Perfect Petal Cream, the emollient that made tired eyes pack their bags and leave.

Libby had a pair of Annie Oakleys in her handbag—the reason for the taxi and the ice show. Though I, as a sport writer for the

Orbit, should have been at the Garden watching them toss a basketball around.

When we sat down in one of the choice boxes at the Paladium the place was filled to capacity, and three rows of standees were in the rear. Celebrities were as thick as tuxedos at a waiters' convention.

In the next box I caught a glimpse of old Amos Tinsley, the millionaire "Flour King," formerly of St. Paul and points West. Tinsley had a droopy mustache, eyes to match, and a fluff of snowy hair. He sat all alone, looking bored.

On the other side of our box I suddenly caught sight of two characters who made my brows lift. One was a shiny-haired, dark-faced man who wore his evening clothes with the air of an ambassador. He had white, square teeth that gleamed in a smile he turned on and off like a faucet. And the label on the polished gent read, "Nicholas Caduro."

A big-time hot shot, gambler, strong-arm and felony expert, Caduro didn't have one racket. He had them all. Wherever there was an easy buck, Nick Caduro was present, reaching for it. A bad guy to meet up with under any conditions, his sleek appearance and line of patter made him doubly dangerous.

THE man in the box with Nick was a big, stoop-shouldered, silly-panned goon tagged George Bister. He was Nick's errand boy, trigger man and general housekeeper. Bister looked like a furry-eared St. Bernard, adoring his master with red-rimmed, patient eyes.

I was still eying those two first citizens of the underworld, staked out in a box, when the lights went down, the conductor's baton up and, in a blare of brass, the entertainment got under way.

Suzette Darcy was the latest sensation on the silver blade. An unknown Minnesota rink habitué a year ago, Suzy had suddenly

burst into prominence like a shooting star challenging Sonja Henie and all the other performers who had found there was a fortune in ice, if you cut it with skates and not an ax.

Lib had told me there was plenty of coin behind Suzette. The minute she made her appearance I understood why. The gal was gorgeous!

Young, beautiful, with a figure more curved than the figure eights she clicked off, her long gleaming, copper-colored hair whirled in the breeze she stirred up. Her eyes were a dusky, shining blue and her lips a tempting crimson.

Her charm and beauty landed with a solid impact. She hadn't been in public view for more than two minutes before any *Variety* scout understood that both she and the ice show were due to be a smash hit and a financial fireball.

When intermission came along the girl friend murmured, "I have an appointment with Miss Darcy after the performance." Libby patted her bag. "Contracts are right here, ready for her signature, together with a certified check. How come you never learned to skate, Johnny?"

"Where I came from," I told her "we used water for drinking purposes only."

Libby wrinkled her cute little nose and I looked in the direction of the Messrs. Caduro and Bister. The perfectly groomed gunny was stifling a polite yawn. The sloppy rum-dum beside him was contemplating the wealthy Amos Tinsley with a dreamy, retrospective gaze.

Finally it was over. The crowd stood and cheered for five minutes. The fascinating Suzette made many bows. Then the lights came up and Lib and I joined the mob pushing a way out.

"Miss Darcy told me to give her a half-hour," Lib murmured. "What time is it now, Johnny?"

It was eleven-thirty. To get rid of the

half-hour I took Mrs. Hart's only daughter across to a java joint and bought two cups of the Brazilian brew. As we went in I saw Lieutenant Larry Hartley, of the Homicide Division, at the end of the counter, dunking a doughnut. He glanced up, smiled at Libby, and nodded to me.

"Hello, Castle. Been over to the ice cube festival? Sharp show, eh?"

Hartley wasn't a bad sort. Off and on I'd been tossed in with him on certain murderous matters that had occasionally cropped up. I liked Hartley more than I did his superior, Captain Fred Mullin, a bulldog technician who growled like a man.

Lib inquired, as we found a booth and edged in, "Isn't that your policeman friend?"

"One of them. But don't be alarmed. I have nothing in common with the Lieutenant."

Libby's dark eyes glinted. "You'd better not have! You promised me you were through with crime. Remember?"

When we'd finished our java and the half-hour was up, we found that to reach the Paladium dressing rooms we had to go down the block and around the corner. Every cab in mirthful Manhattan seemed to have converged on the stage door, when we spotted it. Taxis mingled with chauffeur-driven limousines and hot rods that only determination kept out of the junk yard.

The stage door was ganged up with well-wishers, bobby-sox autograph addicts, and florists' delivery boys. Replacing the legendary doorman, of suspenders and sour disposition, an impressively uniformed party examined Libby's credentials. He went into conference with a backstage board of directors and they finally decided to pass us in.

"Third floor," he said. "Take the elevator down the corridor."

WE DID, getting out on an overhanging cement tier patterned with doors. The lighting was indirect. Small sofas and chairs, for the comfort and convenience of visitors, were scattered along the way. It was luxuriously different from the backstage world of the ordinary side-street playhouse.

The layout was de luxe, from the shining chromium knobs on the stainless steel doors to the clubroom atmosphere.

Suzette Darcy's dressing room was at the end of the tier, near a flight of fire-exit stairs. No one could miss it. The star's name was gold-leafed neatly over a pearl button. Libby put a gloved thumb on that.

I said, "You don't need to ring. She's expecting us—the door is open."

She pressed the button anyway, giving me a quizzical stare.

"Stop drooling, Johnny. And when I introduce you, look, don't touch!"

"Yes, ma'am."

Libby rang again—and again. Then she began to frown, drawing her arched brows together and pursing her lips.

"Wait here," she said finally. "I'll go in. If she's decent, I'll call you."

No more than two or three minutes elapsed. During it I listened to a murmur of voices coming out of the rooms on the tiers below. Gay, happy voices. Excited voices belonging to the members of the troupe. Overjoyed voices, because the show was in the bag for a protracted New York stay.

Suddenly I heard something else—a muffled, strangled scream from beyond the doorway through which Libby had gone!

In a flash I darted inside. Electric lights dazzled me for an instant. Mirrors on nearly all the walls reflected my image, but I didn't stop for any self-admiration.

Two dames were stretched out on the deep rug that covered the dressing room floor. One was Libby Hart, and one glance was enough to show me she had fainted.

With the other gal it was different.

Suzette Darcy, still in her radiant finale costume, lay huddled between one mirrored wall and a mahogany dressing table that looked as long as a freight car. Her complexion was white where the makeup ended. So white that the ugly crimson stain soaking the front of the costume, and trickling down over one folded arm, was like a bright ruby-red river in the light.

It was no faint.

And one glance here was enough to tell me the copper-haired skating star had done her last twirl. The Minnesota sensation had been booked for the long sleep—by someone who evidently had used a gun holding large-sized slugs. It was the kind of slumber that no alarm clock could disturb.

Susy was dead!

Chapter II

IN a tiled Hollywood bath off the dressing room I found an ice-water spigot and glasses. I filled one, snatched up a towel, slopped it in cold Croton and applied it to Libby Hart's complexion.

It worked. She sat up, shaking the dampness out of her eyes and face.

"What happened?" she asked wonderingly. "Somebody turned off the lights and—"

Then she got Miss Darcy in focus and started an encore. I used the towel again and hoisted her up off the rug.

"We're getting out of here—at least you are, fast! Come on—pull yourself together."

Libby buckled slightly at the knees, but managed to keep going as I led her toward the stainless steel door. When I reached it, I put a handkerchief over the knob and pulled it open.

That gave me a perfect view into slate-gray eyes fringed with thick, dark lashes which belonged to a small pretty blond girl who wore a smart broadtail coat and no hat.

She wasn't smiling. There was grim determination on her vermilion lips. She looked at Lib, then at me, and asked:

"Do you know if Miss Darcy's busy?"

Libby choked. I answered casually, "Miss Darcy isn't doing anything at the moment."

"In that case," the blond said, "I'll go in. I am Nan Tinsley."

She made a move to pass me. I put a hand on her arm. A nice, soft, rounded arm.

"Sorry, but you'd better not go in. Miss Darcy's just been murdered!"

The slate-gray eyes went wide and dark. The mouth lost its fixed smile. Nan Tinsley shifted her gaze quickly to Libby. The girl friend's horror-stricken expression was all Nan Tinsley needed for confirmation. The next moment she had spun around on her high heels and was streaking down the cement-lined tier.

When I got Libby Hart in a taxi five minutes later, she still was in a daze, still shaken.

I patted her hand before I closed the door. "I'll phone later, honey."

The taxi chugged off and I hot-footed it back to the dressing room and took a look around.

On the dressing table were samples from Arcady House. I noticed a pound jar of cold cream in a handsomely decorated container before I glanced about in search of the gun.

There wasn't any sign of it in either the dressing room or the bath. The killer must have walked in, banged away, shoved the smoker in his clothes and walked out. Then I remembered the difficulty Libby and I had getting past the stage doorman. At the same minute I recalled the fire-exit stairway a couple of strides from the dressing room door. It would have been no trick for anyone to have come up them for target practice and left the same way.

I went back and looked at the dead girl. The folded-back arm caught and held my

attention. The hand, graceful and white, was half turned over and half open. Its palm glistened oddly. Swallowing, I leaned to get a better look.

After that I used the telephone in the corner of the room to make two calls. One was to the city desk at the *Orbit*. The other was to Police Headquarters.

Within twenty minutes the dressing room was full of uniformed authority—the flashlight brigade, fingerprint experts, Captain Fred Mullin and his two trained yes-and-no men, Dave Wheeler and the same Larry Hartley who had been at the coffee joint. They were flanked by a stenographer, and a specialist from Ballistics.

I was high on Mullin's Hate Parade. It had to do with a piece I'd once written for the *Orbit* dealing with antiquated police routines as practiced by the captain, with the aid of pieces of hose and thousand-watt electric light bulbs.

MULLIN hadn't enjoyed my sarcasm. He hadn't forgotten, either. I knew he was waiting for a chance to get even.

"So you're the party who telephoned?" A pleased smile began to spread over his granite pan. "I've been waiting a long time, Castle."

"Not for this one," I interrupted pleasantly. "I've got an alibi that's practically foolproof."

I gave it to him on a plush-lined platter. The smile faded. He barked orders and swung around on me again.

"I'm not through with you yet," he growled. "Stay put."

I sat down, chain-smoked, and watched Homicide at work. Doc Bagby, the medical examiner, was busy over a couple of tables that had been drawn together. Hartley and Wheeler were hunting for the gun. The fingerprint gang threw powder around and the photographers exploded flashbulbs.

I did some heavy thinking. Suzette had been on the stage at eleven-thirty. At midnight she was dead. In those thirty minutes she had gone back to her dressing room, but she hadn't had time to peel off her costume or get into a robe.

The killer could have been waiting for her, either in the bathroom or in full view. He must have blasted her fast and left in a hurry.

Why? What was his motive? Why should anyone want to knock off a dame as charming and beautiful as Suzette Darcy?

Mullin consulted with his entourage and came back to me.

"Where's the gun, Castle?" he snapped.

"What gun?"

"The one you must have found while you were moseying into my business—here."

"No rod, Captain. Not even one you could hang a curtain on." I got up. "Have a frisk—free."

Mullin's fishy eyes drilled into me. He put a big hand between my shoulders and pushed.

"Get out of here! The more I look at you, the less I want to see of you!"

"In my book," I said putting on my hat, "the feeling's pari-mutual!"

Instead of taking the elevator, I opened the fire-exit door and took the stairs. Dim lights burned on each landing. On the ground floor the door I figured led to the side street was locked. Back up a flight, I headed for the stage door, forcing my way through a crowd of the morbidly curious outside it, and turned toward Broadway.

I hadn't gone half a block before I had a feeling that I was being tailed. Someone had pulled away from the knot of people at the stage door and was ambling after me. I slowed down until he walked under an arc light.

I had a view of a big, stoop-shouldered, slow moving guy, familiar from the dented-

in crown of his dicer to the baggy ends of his trousers. Georgie Bister, Nick Caduro's jack-of-all-trades.

I braked at the corner, waiting for Bister. That evidently disconcerted him. He was grinning sheepishly when he reached me.

"Hello, Castle. Nice night, ain't it?"

"Why the tail?"

Bister threw away the match stick he'd been munching on. "Tail?" he repeated, then as if remembering, he said, "Look Castle, Nick asked me to give you a message in case I saw you. He wants you to drop around to his place for a drink."

"Tell him thanks. I'm on the wagon."

That didn't do. Bister shook his head slowly. "Look, Castle. I don't want no trouble. I hate trouble. Nick said, when I saw you, I should bring you up to his apartment."

"And if I don't want to go?"

Georgie patted his pocket significantly. "I guess you'll go, Castle." He stopped a cab, held the door open for me to get in and in less than ten minutes the meter-cheater pulled up in front of a massive brick building on Central Park West, called the Stanwich Arms. Bister followed me into an elevator and out of it on the fifteenth floor.

We went down a hall to a door. Georgie rang the bell and Nick Caduro answered the summons.

"Why, it's Castle!" He held the door wider. "Come in."

THE shiny-haired bad man had taken off dinner coat and vest. The glossy white of his dress shirt now accented his swarthy complexion. He led the way into a living room where some inferior decorator had been allowed to run loose, and waved me into a chair.

"What's the idea, Nick?" I tried to sound indignant, but I was worried. I didn't

like making early morning cans on characters of Caduro's type.

He told Bister to shake up some alcohol and hooked his thumbs in the black silk of the suspenders holding up his high-waisted pants.

Then he said, "I hear how the babe who laid 'em in the aisles at the Paladium tonight got herself shot up." Caduro's tone was quietly conversational. "Friend of hers, Castle?"

"I never saw her until tonight."

"But you called on her in her dressing room. Georgie saw you and your doll at the stage door. He heard who you were asking for. After awhile you came out and put your gal in a taxi. Then you went back. You were there a long time before the badges arrived. Right?"

"Georgie has twenty-twenty vision. So what?"

"So you'd better let him check on what you've got in your pockets," Nick purred.

Bister came away from a mahogany bar and waited for me to get out of the chair. He said, "Hold your arms up and out," and began to feel through my pockets.

Caduro's order for the feel around had an angle. Bister was frisking me to find out if I'd found anything in Suzette Darcy's dressing room and brought it away with me.

Such as a murder gun, for instance. Or some bit of evidence not turned in to Mullin.

Georgie made it complete. He checked my belt, even ran his fingers over the cuffs of my trousers. I took off my shoes at his request and he examined the interiors and heels.

Finally Bister straightened up. He shook his head.

"Clean, Nick." It was impossible to tell from Caduro's basilisk stare whether he was disappointed or not. His thin smile still displayed his square, white teeth.

He said, "Sit down, Castle. Have a drink."

"I don't use the stuff," I told him. "Besides, I'm overdue on a date—with a single bed. If you don't mind, I'll be running along. Nice to have seen you."

For a minute the smile faded. His glinting eyes narrowed slightly. He shrugged and nodded.

"I'll see you out." We walked to the foyer, with Bister peering after us. "By the way," Nick went on casually, "if I were you, I wouldn't nose around with this Paladium thing too much, Castle. I like your slant on sports, the way you write for the *Orbit*. I'd hate to be reading some new guy's stuff."

He stopped at the hall door and slid a cigarette between his lips. I didn't say anything. Caduro began to smile again.

"Another thing. I wouldn't mention the fact you stopped in here tonight, either. To anyone." He opened the door, stepping aside to let me pass. "Because," he added softly, "you never know when you might get an attack of dropsy, and fall right out of circulation!"

Chapter III

NEXT morning the front pages of the metropolitan press headlined the mysterious killing of the coppery-haired Suzette Darcy. Bill Jamison, the *Orbit's* top crime narrator, had turned in his usual good job on the dressing room smear.

The way I got it, from Bill's story, Mullin's score on his preliminary investigation had been a hundred per cent zero. Homicide had been interviewing people to find suspects, with no results.

When I got down to the office, Jamison was at his desk, wearing a green eyeshade and a frayed look. He grinned when I dropped down on the edge of his desk.

"They tell me you found the body, Johnny. You didn't run across a motive at the same time?"

"No. What do you think?"

Jamison shrugged. "Could be anything. Love affair that went wrong, blackmail—whatever brings on sudden death. I learned one interesting thing. Do you know whose dough was backing the skating show?"

I stretched for an answer. "Tinsley?"

Bill pushed up his eyeshade. "Right. How did you learn that?"

"Just a guess. I saw him there last night. Tinsley's a Minnesota taxpayer. Susy came from there. What about Tinsley?"

Jamison looked at his notes. "He's been a widower for ten years. He's worth twenty million. He's the party who bought the Emory Emeralds from some Indian potentate for his late wife. Six perfect green stones, each worth a flock of coin. I suppose you know, Johnny, that Mrs. Tinsley's jewel collection was second to none in this country. The emeralds, in a short necklace, were the top item. You can get the dope from the morgue files. I did."

I asked, after a long pause, "Where would Nick Caduro fit in?"

"That punk!" Bill took off the eyeshade. "You don't mean *he's* in on this?"

"Nickie boy was at the ice frolic last night. He knew an about me being in the Darcy dressing room. He was so interested, he sent his trigger-man, Georgie Bister, to invite me up to his apartment in the Stanwich Arms for a drink. After Bister frisked me, Caduro told me I was due for lead poisoning if I mentioned my call."

Jamison's eyes began to gleam. "Caduro, eh? Johnny, if that mug is interested, it might mean plenty."

"Keep me out of it," I said. "I like breathing!" As an after-thought, I asked, "Say, where does Tinsley hole in?"

“Hotel Republic,” Bill answered. “He’s got the gold suite there. You’re not thinking of stopping in to see him, are you?”

“No—not him.”

I called Libby at Arcady House, made a dinner date, and glanced at my watch. A few minutes after eleven—a good time for a pre-lunch call.

The lobby of the Hotel Republic, midway up aristocratic Park Avenue, looked like a Hollywood movie set. Telephone calls announcing my presence were relayed back and forth until finally a desk clerk, a wistful-eyed party in a cutaway coat, informed me I could use one of the elevators.

The gold suite did business on the twentieth story. A man-servant with the same droopy eyes as his boss ushered me into a lounge room with a view. Five minutes later the door opened and Nan Tinsley entered.

The little blond was wearing a dragon-embroidered Chinese housecoat instead of a broadtail coat. Bare feet were in silver sandals. In the morning sunshine her gold hair glimmered like the stuff at Fort Knox.

SHE looked at me and I saw recognition in the slate gray eyes.

“Oh!” she said.

“I’ll make this brief, Miss Tinsley. I stopped around to ask you a few routine questions.”

“Are you with the police? I was told you were a newspaper reporter who wanted an interview—about my—ah—about television.”

“That’s right. But my interest in Miss Darcy’s murder has a police connection. I’m trying to turn up some clues I can hand Homicide, to help them as well as my paper.”

“What do you want to ask me?” She was beginning to chill.

“You wanted to see Miss Darcy last

night. What about?”

“That was a personal matter.” Her tone was suddenly defensive.

“Don’t let’s beat bushes, Miss Tinsley,” I said. “Murder’s murder, and nothing’s personal when investigations get underway. Be frank with me and I’ll save you a lot of assorted headaches.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“The police would like to know why you went to see Suzette Darcy. If I mentioned your call, Captain Mullin of Homicide would want you at Headquarters for some chitchat. Mullin is a most unsympathetic individual. And, there’d be a lot of newspaper reporters with their ears hanging out. They’d have you all over the front pages with pictures. You know—‘Millionaire’s Heiress Tied In With Paladium Pass-out.’”

The slate-gray eyes darkened. Slender fingers began to move up and down the sash of the Chinese housecoat. She helped herself to a cigarette from a crystal container, took a drag on it, and looked at me thoughtfully.

“There’s no mystery about it,” she said finally. “I’d known Miss Darcy for quite awhile. She came from a town near where I live in Minnesota. I merely wanted to congratulate her.”

She made it sound authentic, but something told me there was more to it than that. I looked at her quizzically. She began to smile. A pleasant smile that said, “Kick that around. What are you going to do about it?”

I got up. It looked like a blank—until I reached the doors. The sad-faced servant who had let me in opened them suddenly and coughed.

“There’s a telephone call for you, Miss Nan. Will take it in here?”

“Phone call?” The blonde mashed out her cigarette.

“Mr. Caduro is on the wire.”

I bowed out, something tingling from the end of my spine to the top of my scalp. Caduro! Telephoning Amos Tinsley's daughter! I began to understand how far in on the tangle the patent-leather-haired hooligan was!

I was out to the street under the Republic's bronze canopy when Larry Hartley started up the steps. The lieutenant gave me a glance sharp enough to shave with.

"I've been looking for you, Castle. The captain wants to split some more conversation with you—concerning last night. I'll only be a minute here. Wait!"

He went through the revolving door. When he came back his face was expressionless.

"Okay, Johnny. Let's go."

Captain Mullin was in one of his moody humors. Which meant that instead of employing his usual hillbilly tactics, he would try to be cute and clever. On him it wasn't becoming.

"So you were pegged coming out of the Hotel Republic," Mullin said, when Hartley told him where he had found me. "Out of your territory, isn't it? What were you doing up there?"

I answered. "I'll have to see a mouthpiece before I answer questions. Or am I under arrest?"

"You will be if you don't stop trying to be foxy with me," he growled. "I'll tell you why you were there. You went up there to see Amos Tinsley." As the captain unloaded that he looked as smug as a rabbit that had just pulled a magician out of a hat.

"Tinsley wasn't in," Hartley murmured, over Mullin's lumpy shoulders. "I telephoned up to find out."

THE head of Homicide fastened his fishy eyes on me. He put one half-soled eleven on the slide of his desk and tried to look tough. That didn't require much effort.

"I'm warning you, Castle. You're attempting to solve the Paladium thing on your own. You want a beat for your paper, and the hell with the New York Police Department."

I didn't say anything. Hartley looked out the window. Mullin went on:

"It's your duty as a citizen to turn any evidence you have over to me. I see now it's the same old stuff. You're playing solo and trying to make a monkey out of me, trying to solve the thing yourself, to show what bright little boys newspaper guys are and what a lot of eggheads are cops."

It was on the tip of my tongue to tell him nature had beaten me to it, making a monkey out of him. But I didn't. Instead, I gave him one of my friendliest smiles and shrugged. I said innocently:

"I don't know what you're talking about, Captain. It's all Russian to me. And I haven't gone far with my lessons with Pal Vishinsky!"

He let that slide.

"What did you want to see Amos Tinsley about?" he demanded. "How did you know he was a friend of Suzette Darcy's? Who gave you the slant on that?"

My ears went up. So the Flour King wasn't just somebody who came from Minnesota where the dead Susy had lived, but had been a friend of hers. I thought, stick around Headquarters and you learn things.

"That's no secret," I said, "It's public knowledge that Tinsley backed the ice show. Or isn't it?"

The telephone rang and Mullin reached for it. Before he picked it up he growled:

"You don't want to do business with me? You're lone-wolfing it again, huh? All right, Castle. I warned you to lay off. Don't, and see what happens to you! That's all for now."

I got up. "Drop over to my place some night soon," I invited.

“What for?” Mullin grunted.

“We’ll open a gas jet,” I said—and left fast.

Riding across town in a taxi, I was thinking hard.

What the icicle-eyed Captain Mullin had let out of the bag concerning the Flour King, late of St. Paul, and his friendship with the glamorous Suzette had started a train of thought that gathered speed at every whistle stop.

I had a double choice.

One, to try and see Tinsley and in some way dig information out of him. The kind it was likely Mullin hadn’t got. The other angle was Tinsley’s attractive daughter.

The first score had been all in her favor. But I had a stronger in now. The Caduro tie-up seemed to be as good as three kings and a pair of aces.

At Longacre Square I dismissed the taxi and headed for a telephone booth in the nearest drugstore. My dime gave me the voice of the old manservant who had admitted me to the gold suite earlier. He said Mr. Tinsley was out. He didn’t know what time he’d be back.

“Let me talk to Miss Tinsley,” I said.

“I’m sorry, sir. She isn’t at home, either.”

“You wouldn’t know where she went? This,” I lied smoothly, “is an old family friend from St. Paul.”

“Which friend?” The voice in my ear dripped honey.

I remembered then that he probably had been with the Tinsley’s for years and knew all their pals. So I slipped the receiver back on the hook and went back to the newspaper office.

Jamison’s desk was vacant. There was a load of mail on mine, mostly from fight managers seeking free publicity for aspiring hopefuls. I sorted through it, pushed it aside and thought hard.

I was still trying to find an answer when

Jamison came in.

“Break?” I asked.

Bill shook his head. “What’s the matter with that cement-head called Mullin? All of a sudden it’s minimum coverage from now on. For security reasons, he says. I can’t even learn if he’s got the gun. It’s a blank wall.”

JAMISON lighted a cigarette and slumped down in his chair. “I’ve got an angle,” I said slowly, “I don’t know how to play it. Tinsley’s daughter knows something, but won’t spill. I saw her after I left here this morning. Somebody was telephoning her when she handed me my hat. The name was Caduro!”

Jamison’s head snapped up with a jerk. “You’re kidding!”

“I’m leveling. What can Nan Tinsley have in common with that bandit? I’m sure I can shake a lot of valuable talk loose if I can see her again and get her started. How?”

“Why don’t you get Beth to phone her? Maybe the butler’s suspicious of a man’s voice. Maybe he has orders.”

“It’s a notion.” I said, and went out to the switchboard.

Beth Wheaton, one of the plug swingers who sailed from Brooklyn and got most of her comedy via the radio, glanced up when I parked.

“Oh, Mr. Castle. You’re wishing a number, maybe?” Dialect went with the question.

“How would you like to earn a five spot?”

“Make it dollars instead of spots and I’ll say yes. You want me to call your girl friend and tell her you’re working late tonight?”

“I want you to call up the Hotel Republic and talk about Miss Nan Tinsley.”

“Oh, society stuff he asks for.” I took a bill out of my leather and let her see its denomination. “Okay, Mr. Castle. What do I

say and how do I say it?"

I gave her a quick briefing—and waited.

The Brooklyn accent wasn't too good, but the droopy-eyed servant evidently wasn't suspicious. Beth thanked him and pulled the plug out.

"Miss Tinsley," she said, "is at the matinee at the Fine Arts Theatre. She's not returning for dinner. Lucky dame!"

Chapter IV

THE playhouse had a quarter to five curtain. I was propped in the lobby fifteen minutes before the audience came out. The show was heavy, drawing-room drama that looked good for a summer run.

Finally the patrons began to come through the lobby doors. They were nearly all out before I had a glimpse of Nan Tinsley, alone, and bee-lining for a taxi. I went after her.

The taxi stopped, and she got in. So did I.

I pulled the door shut and said to the hackie, "Riverside Drive. I'll tell you when to stop." Then I turned and looked into gray eyes full of sparks.

"What's the meaning of this?" Nan Tinsley demanded.

"Plenty. You held out this morning. I gave you an even break and you tried to cheat. This time it's going to be different."

"Yes?" The sparks burned out, but her pretty face still remained as informative as a piece of stone.

"I've learned a couple of things. About your father being friendly with Suzette Darcy. So far that's been under the counter. The police haven't released it. I'll have to if you don't open up."

She drew her red underlip between her teeth. I made sure the glass partition between the front and back of the cab was shut. I breathed in the smell of white lilacs. It came from the green dress and smartly

tailored coat Nan Tinsley was wearing.

"Take me back to my hotel!" There was a snap in her voice. "I have a dinner date!"

"With Nick Caduro?"

She didn't answer. She didn't have to. From the flash of her eyes I knew I had scored.

I said to the driver, pushing the partition open, "Take us down to Centre Street, Police Headquarters."

He gave me a fast glance, and turned at the first corner going the right way. Nan Tinsley's lips were a stubborn red line. Her gloved fingers wove together.

I waited.

Five blocks. Then ten. I had figured she was obstinate enough to keep silent the whole way when she suddenly cracked.

"You're not really going to take me to the police?" she asked abruptly, a catch in her voice. "What do you want to know?"

"Take us uptown again," I directed the driver, shoved the partition shut again and turned back to the blonde. "What did you go up to Suzette Darcy's dressing room for? And don't say congratulations or autograph."

It took a long time coming. Nan Tinsley wasn't the kind who folded fast. But finally she drew a deep breath and straightened.

"My father was at Headquarters this morning. He must have told them about the Emory Emeralds. If they know, everyone else will—sooner or later. I wanted to ask Suzette to return them. They belonged to my mother. Maybe you've heard of them. They're famous and worth a lot of money. My father had no right to give them to Suzette. They really belong to me—my mother wanted me to have them! Dad knows that, but—but—"

"Your father thought they'd go good with copper hair?" I put in.

She was started now, and she answered that question without hesitation.

"It isn't entirely his fault! Suzette Darcy

had been working on him ever since she first saw the emeralds. And Dad—well, he's not as young as he once was and I suppose he was flattered by her attention. You know how men get. He did anything she asked—anything and everything. I didn't care about the money he spent, but when he started giving her something that belonged to me, I thought it was time to call a halt."

"The cops could get you a Grand Jury indictment on that one statement!" I murmured.

"I didn't kill her!" The gray eyes flashed again. "All I wanted to do was see her. She was carefully avoiding me. I wanted to tell her she couldn't keep the emeralds, that they weren't my father's to give! That's why I went to her dressing room last night."

IT ADDED up. An old man's infatuation for a glamorous gal who was on the make. This motive was one hundred per cent sound. The emeralds had been green lights to Death!

"What about Nick Caduro?" I asked Nan. "Where does he come in?"

Her lips tightened. The stubborn look froze her face again. But I knew the system now. When she shifted her gaze, I made a show of reaching out to push the partition back.

That did it.

"Mr. Caduro's a private detective I hired the other day."

I could only stare. I wanted to laugh, but I didn't. It wasn't a gag with her, either. Her tone was as serious as a major operation.

"Private detective?" I ejaculated, and she must have sensed my surprise. "How did you meet him? What did you hire him for?"

She pressed her fingers together. "At first I thought I should have helped to get the emeralds back. I didn't know what Suzette would do. If she refused to return them, I decided to have them taken away

from her. I don't know much about police methods, but I had an idea a private detective was what I needed. So I engaged Mr. Caduro's services."

"But where did you find him?" I insisted, really interested.

"I don't mind telling you. I was in the cocktail lounge at the hotel. Last Tuesday, about five o'clock. The house detective stopped at my table for a minute. I knew him because he had found a suitcase that had been misplaced when we checked in."

"What did you say to the house detective?" I asked.

"I asked him if he could recommend a private detective agency. He gave me two or three names, then went away. He hadn't been gone more than a minute or two before Mr. Caduro, who had been sitting nearby, got up and came over."

I nodded. "Nickie boy had overheard you. Opportunity never has to knock twice for him. So he told you he was a private detective and would be glad to offer his services. What did he do for credentials and an office address?"

Nan Tinsley said that Caduro had shown her a badge, and had explained that he was preparing to open larger offices and that until he decided on a location he was operating from his suite in the Stanwich Arms. I could imagine the suave, convincing way he had worked himself into her confidence.

"And," I said, "you hired him and told him about the Emory Emeralds. What did he say?"

"That he'd get them back for me. All he wanted was a five-hundred-dollar retainer."

Light began to shine through. Caduro, in the role of a private eye! A fortune in emeralds handed him! The kind of grab that comes once in a lifetime! Custom-made and built to size!

No wonder, I told myself, the sloppy Bister had given me the frisk in Nick's

apartment. That was sufficient to show me Caduro hadn't got his hands on the green gems. But because he'd had an idea that I might have found them in the dressing room—that fact brought a swarm of ideas and questions buzzing through my brain.

Someone had murdered Suzette Darcy for the Emory Emeralds! But hadn't been able to get away with them. Something, somewhere, had gone wrong. They had put on the kill, but had failed to collect. The finger of suspicion leveled at Caduro. He knew about the famous gems, knew who had them. Yet if his gun had hurled the slug into the ice star, there hadn't been a pay-off for him—yet.

“Can I go back to the hotel now?” Nan Tinsley's voice had a quaver again.

I said, “Sure,” and gave the driver the Hotel Republic as a new address.

Then I said to Nan, “But you're not keeping any engagement with Mr. Caduro, if you have one, tonight. I'm going to introduce you to a girl friend of mine, a Miss Hart. I'll see that she keeps you out of trouble.”

Nan's brows went up. “What kind of—” she began, stopping when I clipped it off short and said, “Private eye trouble! In the fashionable raiment of Nick Caduro.”

Then I explained, giving her a quick sketch of the gent and his activities while the taxi rolled toward Park Avenue and the hotel. . . .

MY WATCH showed it was almost seven o'clock when I got back to my rooms in a building which at one time had been a livery stable. Some smart operator, realizing each stall would make a three-room suite, had done some remodeling. The agent who had rented me the place said it was lucky. There was a horseshoe in every room.

The minute I unlocked the front door I realized I'd had visitors. The place looked

as if a junior cyclone had hit it. Someone had given it a complete going over.

Every drawer had been emptied on the floor. The mattress had been slashed and pulled apart. Feathers from the pillows lay like snowflakes in the bedroom. Even the pictures had been dragged down from the walls.

Bister? It was the sloppy type of job a sloppy guy like Georgie would do.

So Nick still thought I had the green flash? That was reassuring in one degree. It meant Nick Caduro would stick around awhile longer. And I needed time to work on an idea that had popped into my mind after I had got Libby on the phone and blarneyed her into playing chaperon for Nan Tinsley that evening.

Lib hadn't liked it. And with her sneaking suspicion that I was up to my old tricks of crime busting again, it had required a lot of soft talk and hard logic to get her to agree.

I put out the lights and left the mess in my rooms as was. It wasn't hard to figure how my visitor had got in. I'd never bothered to put a burglar-proof lock on my front door. All that would have done would have been to send uninvited callers around to the rear windows. There were a mere five feet from the areaway.

When I went out I cased the block. When Mullin thought I was chiseling on the police he had a habit of sticking a shag on me. It was likely, also, that the unconvinced Caduro might have Georgie hidden out somewhere nearby to watch everything I did, whom I knew.

But nobody tailed me to Broadway and the cafeteria where I had some quick cuisine.

The case of the murdered skating sensation was going around in circles. The same kind of dizzy whirligigs Suzette had cut on the ice of the Paladium stage. Only one thing was definite. The Emory

Emeralds were still missing.

I doubted, even after what Nan had said about her father seeing the police, that Amos Tinsley had mentioned the gems to Homicide. After all, a man like the Flour King had some pride. And the fact that Hartley had gone back to the Hotel Republic, probably for more questioning, might or might not confirm the notion that Tinsley had kept quiet about the emeralds.

What I had in mind was a long chance. I hadn't forgotten Suzette Darcy's folded-back pale white hand. The hand I'd looked at when I had first seen her crumpled figure on the dressing room floor. The recollection of it came back, swiftly and sharply.

It was a hundred-to-one bet, but sometimes long shots upset the dope and breeze in.

I paid my check and started toward Columbus Circle.

Chapter V

FIFTEEN minutes later I had reached the Paladium. The place had been closed until a new star could be found for the ice pageant. The huge building was in darkness.

Passing the gay posters of Suzette Darcy, I went on around to the stage entrance. It was hard to believe that just a few hours ago the place had been the scene of gaiety and excitement, then of confusion and morbid curiosity.

I looked for a watchman. The outer doors were open, the inner locked. A dim light burned in a cement-floored recess. An elderly man, in a tilted back chair, slapped his feet on the cement when I walked in on him.

"Police business." I made it authoritative, giving him a flash at my police card.

I put the card away and slid a bill out of my hip pocket wallet. That interested him. He looked from the money to me, then back

at the cash again.

"About last night?" he asked. When I nodded he said, "There's nobody around now. They took the cop off this afternoon."

I handed the money over. "I've got to go up for awhile. Okay?"

"Sure. I'm making my rounds now. Take all the time you want."

He unlocked the inside doors and pulled a switch. More small, wan lights flickered on inside.

I found the stairs and went up to the third tier, my footsteps making hollow echoes. The stainless steel door of the star's dressing room was shut, but not locked.

I felt around inside until I found the wall switch. That turned on a couple of lamps and filled the mirror walls with my reflection.

Except that the dressing room had been cleaned up of exploded flash bulbs, cigar ashes and fingerprint powder, everything was as it had been when I had charged in after hearing Libby's anguished scream. I glanced at the floor where Suzy had reposed. There was still a blood stain on the rug.

My gaze went to the dressing table, the Arcady House products, and on to the door of the adjoining bath. I moved slowly over to that. As I reached it I felt a cool current of air on my ankles.

Then the almost soundless click of the door latch!

Turning, I looked into the round, black O of a .45-caliber Colt automatic, gripped in the hand of Nick Caduro. It was leveled at my heart and steady as a rock.

Behind the dapper Nickie, Georgie Bister, a match stuck in one corner of his seamy-lipped mouth, was watching and enjoying every minute of it.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, Castle," Caduro said. "Remember?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Sit down. I want a little conversation

with you.”

I dropped down in the same chair I’d warmed while waiting for Homicide the previous night. Caduro lowered the gun to a new level.

“What have you got to say, Castle?” His tone was like the steel he held.

A chill that started at my scalp this time worked down all the way to my shoes. I felt an inner cramp, quick and twisting. Caduro’s eyes were as deadly as the weapon he gripped.

“You could have asked me to show George around the premises,” I began, trying to keep my voice steady. “He didn’t have to pull my place to pieces.”

Bister laughed. Caduro snapped, “So you got to the Tinsley dame and stalled her on me? She broke the date I had with her and I don’t need a blueprint to tell me why.” He took a step closer, a muscle in his cheek twitching. “Let that ride. You know what I want!”

“Sure, emeralds. The Emory Emeralds. But what makes you think I have them? I was clean when Georgie went through me in your apartment. They weren’t in mine. So that’s that.”

Caduro’s lips folded back in a thin, dangerous smile.

“Sure. But you’re not clean now. What did you come back here for tonight? I’ll tell you. You found the emeralds last night. You were too smart to walk out with them then. So you stashed them in here somewhere. Where?”

BISTER moved away from the door. His right hand dropped carelessly in the pocket of his overcoat. The match stick in the corner of his mouth stopped bobbing and weaving.

Caduro’s eyes peered at me. The cold chill spread, wrapping around me like an icy blanket.

“If the emeralds were here when the

Darcy girl was bumped,” I heard myself saying, “why weren’t they picked up then?”

“Because,” Caduro rasped, “Bister’s a mouse! The gal screamed and he got scared! So scared his gun went off—this gun!”

“That’s right,” the rum-dum mumbled. “Why didn’t she keep her mouth shut? She wouldn’t have got hurt. All I come for—”

“Shut up, you dummy!” Caduro cut in.

“Knowing about her won’t do him no good where he’s going,” Bister whined. “Come on, Nick. Put him away and let’s get out of here. I’m worried about that watchman.”

Caduro’s .45 burrowed into my chest. He was so close I could feel his breath on my hair and face. There was murder in his mind.

“Last half of the last inning, Castle. Where’s the stuff?”

I could almost feel his finger get set on the trigger. Something came up in my throat, a lump that I couldn’t swallow. My heart slowed to a waltz time tick and then began to rhumba.

After all, I told myself, what was my life compared with some green stones? And how did I know the idea I had dreamed up was the right one? Even if I told Nickie about it, and it proved to be correct, he certainly wasn’t going to turn me loose. Not now.

“Try that big jar of cold cream over there,” I managed to say.

Caduro stepped back. Bister gulped. It sounded like a seal swallowing a fish.

“What’s it—a rib?” Georgie laughed.

“Last night, when I was up here”—I squeezed the words out painfully—“I noticed one of her hands. Something glistened on it. Cold cream. There wasn’t any on her face—”

Bister’s exclamation rang like a bell. “The dame was standing right over there near that jar when I came in!”

“Get it!” Caduro’s command cracked

like a whip. "What are you waiting for? Bring it over here!"

The sloppy Bister went for the Arcady House container like a terrier after a rat. Another order from Nick and Georgie brought a folded towel in from the bath. He stretched that out flat on the floor.

Caduro handed him the jar. "Dump it."

Bister complied, but with not too much success. The thick, white stuff didn't spill easily. Georgie kept rapping the sides of the can with his big hand.

"Reach in, you dope !" Nick snarled. "Feel around!"

Georgie did. My heart stopped its pounding when his fingers waded around and began to come up with something. The lamplight flashed on what looked like green glass when Bister wiped the cold cream from it.

Caduro, turning sideward, bent over to see better. The big, untidy hoodlum's breathing sounded like a calliope warming up. But all I could think of was that I had been right about when the Emory Emeralds had been cached. I hoped I was going to be right about the impulse beating at the back of my brain.

It was now or never!

I gripped the arms of the chair and shot out of it. Nick's position made him a perfect setup for attack. Bent sideward, he was not only off-balance but in mowing him down he would fall on top of the crouched-over Georgie.

A carom shot, if I ever saw one!

My shoulder hit him like a bowling ball between the Number Two and Three pins. It wasn't so much strength as swiftness and surprise. With a ripped-out oath Nickie boy slammed into Bister and both went down, faces to the rug.

The cold cream jar rolled merrily away while I grabbed for the gun that had bounced out of Caduro's hand. It was about ten inches from the tips of my fingers. I had

to work fast. I was just touching the stock of the rod when Caduro wriggled out from under me and used a knee.

IT WAS an agonizing jolt. It made me clamp my teeth down on the groan that burst out of my throat. But I kept on reaching. I had the gun the next minute. It was off safety and ready to use!

The room danced before my eyes. I was full of pain. But I hardly felt the pain when I saw Caduro scramble to his feet and start to come at me. With a tremendous effort I got the gun up and pressed the trigger. The roar sounded as if an artillery barrage were being laid down in the room. I kept on pumping the gun madly, wildly, until suddenly, and without notice, the lights went out and the noise stopped.

I seemed to shoot down a chute—into a lot of waiting black coal. Only, as the radio comics Beth Wheaton listened to would have said, it didn't hurt because it was soft coal.

Soft as fleece. . . .

When I came out of it I thought somebody had turned the clock back.

Because I was still in the dressing room, but it was full of uniformed authority again. I was laid out on an upholstered settee and Lieutenant Hartley was busy chafing my wrists. Over his left ear I saw Captain Mullin. That stocky figure was across the room. The emerald necklace hung suspended from one of his stubby fingers. Somebody must have cleaned off the cream while I was sleeping. Now it sparkled and scintillated like Cartier's front window.

I looked past Mullin. A couple of plainclothes men were giving first aid to the Messrs. Caduro and Bister. Both had been shot, Georgie in the legs and Nickie boy in the arms. Wheeler was trying handcuffs on them for size, and Georgie was bleeding out a full confession in a mumble-jumble of words.

“Feeling better, Johnny?” Hartley picked up the flask that had left a sting in my mouth.

“I’m okay. What happened?”

“Nothing much except that two of your six shots rang bells. Good thing for you the watchman was handy, heard the racket and came in. Looks like you decided to pass out or something at the wrong moment. But it’s all in and on the books, now. We’ve got the gun, the guy who murdered Suzette Darcy—and the motive!”

I sat up and lowered my feet to the floor. That felt steady under them. Caduro threw a venomous glance at me, but I didn’t pay any attention. I was more interested in Captain Fred Mullin, the smile on his granite pan, and the hand that he held out as he flat-footed over to me.

“Much as I hate doing it,” he rumbled, “I’ve got to hand it to you, Castle. With my help you sewed this case up to the Queen’s taste. How about a lift downtown—or anywhere else that you may want to go?”

“Thanks,” I told him. “All I want is a telephone and a call to the gold suite at the Hotel Republic. When I get my gal friend there on the wire, Captain, you can speak your piece—for me.”

Mullin rubbed his chin and looked puzzled.

“Yeah? What do you want me to tell her?”

I grinned and reached for the telephone.

“What a swell guy I am, and how you did all the heavy work on this one. I didn’t have a thing to do with it. Right?”

He nodded, and I got the number.