

FIVE MINUTES FROM THE GRAVE

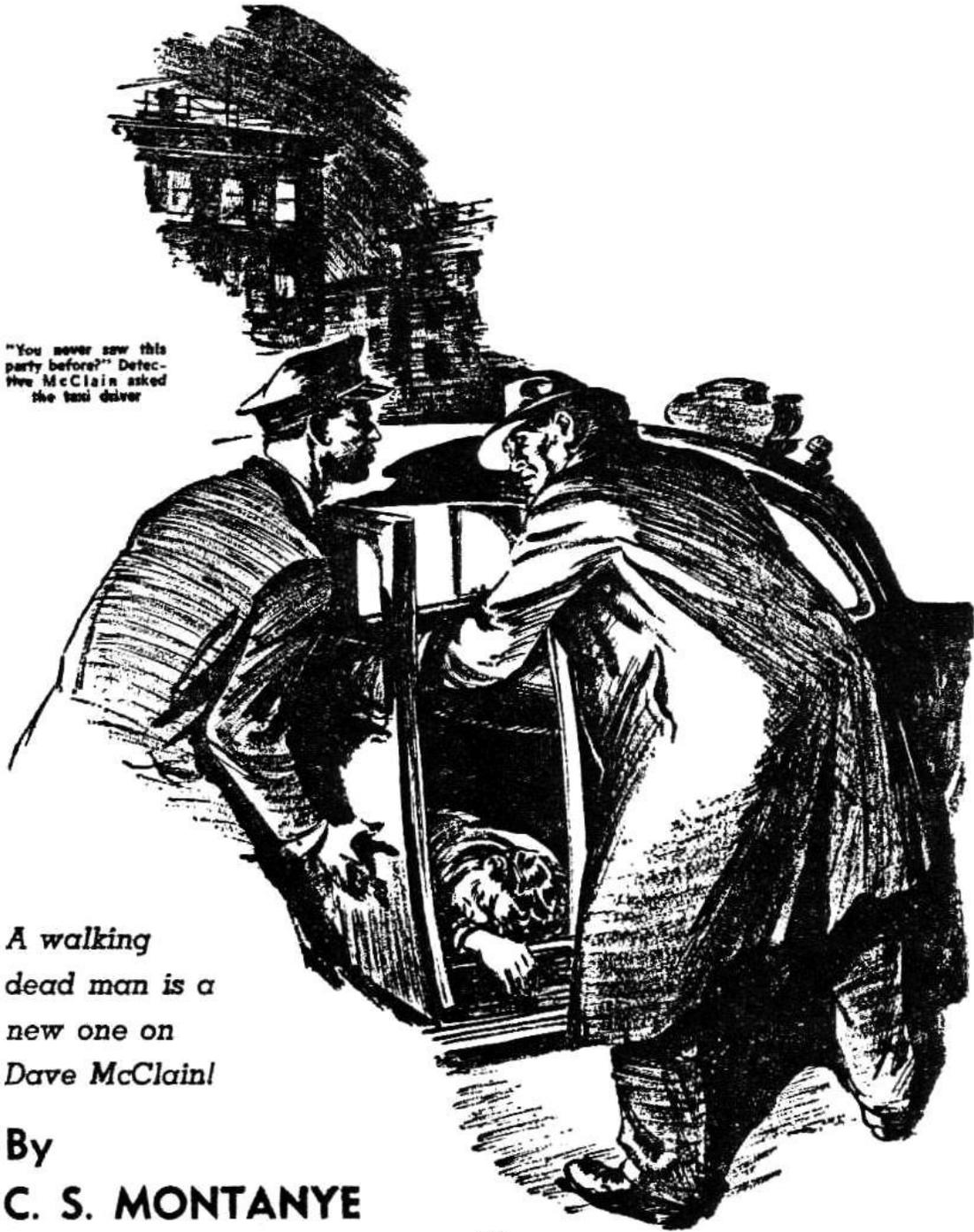
"You never saw this party before?" Detective McClain asked the taxi driver

*A walking
dead man is a
new one on
Dave McClain!*

**By
C. S. MONTANYE**

THE knocking grew louder. Dave McClain, the big, cigar smoking Headquarters dick, turned over in bed. That didn't shut the noise out. It continued, stepping up its tempo.

Mac opened one drowsy eye. The bedroom was black as the interior of a West Virginia coal mine. He opened the other eye and sat up, rubbing his leathery face. The voice of Anna, the sister he



boarded with, drifted in:

“Dave! Wake up! Wake up, Dave!”

McClain grunted, slapped his large, flat feet on the floor and reached for a bathrobe.

The phosphorescent hands on his alarm clock told him it was ten minutes after three in the morning.

He said, “Fooley!” switched on a light and bobbed and weaved over to the door.

“Where’s the fire?”

“There’s a man here to see you, Dave.” Anna, in a faded kimono, nodded a head full of curlers toward the opposite end of the hall. “His name is Charlie Shramm and he says it’s important! He says he knows you.”

“He’d better know me well,” Mac growled.

Before he could add to the statement he was interrupted by the early morning caller. A young man who wore a taxi driver’s hat stepped in from the apartment’s foyer. Mac recognized him as a guy he had known for some time. A hard working, on-the-level hot rod chauffeur who hacked for the Green Cab outfit.

“I’m just around the corner.” McClain saw that there was a glitter in Charlie Shramm’s eyes. “All of a sudden I remembered you parked here, Mac. I came right up. You’d better hustle down.”

“On account of—what?”

“Me having a stiff in my wagon!” Shramm answered, with a wheezy, indrawn breath.

The taxi, as its driver had said, was around the corner. It stood in front of a darkened delicatessen store. It was one of the Green Cab Company’s older jobs. It didn’t have the new removable roof, Neon advertising or radio equipment.

Shramm pointed to the curb side rear door.

“Open it and take a peek.”

McClain did. Crumpled on the floor,

when he clicked on the cab’s overhead light, he saw the contorted figure of a young man in a blue suit. A gray felt hat had rolled across the seat. The man’s face was pressed to the floor mat, one hand pushed under his coat in a Napoleonic gesture. The other arm was flung limply wide and rested across the foot rail.

WAXY face and glazed, staring eyes, these told their own story. Dave McClain, who knew more about death than most undertakers, took one look and turned to Charlie Shramm.

“The guy’s an angel. What happened?”

In reply, the hackie pointed down the street. Almost at the corner was a lighted day-and-night armchair lunchroom. Shramm said:

“I stopped here. Thirty minutes ago. I walked over for a cup of mud and a sinker. When I came back this party’s in my cab.”

Mac’s brows drew together. Through force of habit he searched his vest pockets for one of his cellophane wrapped torpedoes. But he had dressed in such a rush that he had forgotten to load before leaving. He was weedless.

“You’re telling me you never saw him before?”

“That’s right. The last fare I had was an hour ago. Two gals and a gent who went uptown. I was bare after I dropped them and rolled down here.”

Fingering a nickel out of his pocket, Mac said, “Call Headquarters. Get whoever’s on the Homicide desk. Tell him you’re calling for me. Tell him to get a squad car and a medical examiner here in a hurry.”

Shramm departed hastily in the direction of the lunchroom and Mac turned his attention to the dead man in the cab. He was young, about twenty-four or five. Rather nice looking, cleanly shaved with reddish brown hair and a slim, medium

sized figure. The blue suit was well pressed, the black shoes recently polished.

Mac's narrowed gaze, traveling down the body, stopped and focused on the shoes. Something on the soles, in under the heels, caught and held his attention. With a thumbnail he loosened a bit of a gray, granular substance and rubbed it thoughtfully between his fingers.

Methodically, Mac searched for the cause of death. He found it a minute later. The man had been shot at a point on his left side some few inches above his alligator belt. There was a small amount of blood around the little hole drilled through his white shirt. The hand under his coat had been pressed tightly against the wound as if trying to hold it closed.

McClain frowned. At first he thought the body had been dumped in Shramm's taxi. A glance at the bullet hole and he wasn't so sure. The man might have been shot some distance away and, by his own power, walked as far as the cab, opened its door and collapsed when he entered.

The pockets of the blue coat contained identification. Several letters, a memo address book, a wallet with a driver's license and eighty-four dollars in cash.

Mac thumbed the driver's license out and looked through its plastic window. It was made out to Arnold Malden, at an address on 115th Street, near Broadway. The money in the leather seemed significant to Mac. It hadn't been a strongarm stickup job. Whoever had gunned Arnold Malden hadn't been after a cash payoff.

Homicide arrived some minutes after Shramm's return. Mac handed the problem to Lieutenant Larry Hartley and went back to his sister's apartment. But not to sleep.

He made himself a pot of coffee and filled his empty vest pockets with the ammunition he needed for clear, inspirational thinking. Then, careful not to

arouse Anna, her husband or Junior, he washed his coffee cup, put it in the dresser and, leaving a trail of acrid smoke in his wake, went down to the street.

The medical examiner had signed a release for the body. Shramm and his green cab had likewise departed. Mac looked up and down the deserted street. There was no use dreaming things up until he had an autopsy report to work on.

But there was nothing to stop him taking a cruise up to 115th Street and the address that had been on Malden's license.

It was an expensive looking apartment. Gray stone, with a bronze canopy and an all night hallman and elevator operator. Half a block away Riverside Drive fringed the silvery flow of the Hudson River. The neighborhood was quiet, eminently respectable.

McClain dug a disgruntled superintendent out of his basement apartment. The man, of Swedish descent, was properly impressed by the visit of the law, but resentful of a four-twenty a. m. awakening.

"You've got a pass-key to Malden's apartment," Mac grunted. "Take me up and open it. I want to look around."

The super didn't object. Mac was all ready with a line of gab in case the man started asking to see a search warrant. He didn't, and a few minutes later they were on the fifth floor.

The door unlocked, Mac went into Arnold Malden's three-room suite.

It was nicely decorated, nicely furnished. The living room was large and comfortable. The bedroom was done in maple and colorful chintz. There was a bath adjoining it. Also, a good sized kitchen in red and white.

"He lived here alone," the super explained. "For three years. Quiet. Tipped well and minded his business. He had a cleaning woman come in every other day.

Took most of his meals out.”

“What was his business?”

The superintendent shrugged. “None of mine. I don’t know. He paid his rent on the first day of every month. That was good enough for me.”

McClain looked around the living room. An enlargement of a camera snap was silver-framed on a table. He walked over to it. The photo was that of the dead Malden and a pretty girl. Taken at some beach resort. There was an ocean and a beach background, sun umbrellas in the distance. Malden and the girl were in bathing suits.

While the super swung the pass-key idly, Mac flatfooted around, spilling cigar ashes en route. He noticed a pile of *Wall Street Journals* on a shelf in the hall closet. Beyond that and the picture in the silver frame there seemed nothing to interest him further.

“Thanks,” he said to the superintendent. “That’s all. You can take to the feathers again.”

AT HEADQUARTERS McClain took a look at the flimsy on the clipboard. The medical examiner’s report was on top. Mac sat down to read it over.

The bullet, fired from a .22 caliber gun, had not, so the report stated, been instantaneously fatal. There was a lot of technical stuff describing the abdominal course the lead had taken before it had found a final lodging place. The big dick skipped the medical terms. What he wanted to know about was whether Arnold Malden could have lived ten or fifteen minutes with the bullet in him.

Mac hunted up “Doc” Bagby, who had done the autopsy. The Headquarters’ surgeon was a mousy little man with a wisp of a mustache and melancholy eyes. McClain thought he could understand the look in them. Bagby’s trade wasn’t

conducive to mirth and merriment. His patients never gave him the satisfaction of recovering.

“Look, Doc. The stiff in the taxi. Could he have walked around with the lead in him?”

“It’s possible.”

“How far?” McClain rubbed his chin. “I mean, how long could he have kept on his pins?”

“I don’t know. Maybe five minutes, maybe longer. By the way, he had plenty of liquor onboard. There was a half pint of alcohol in his stomach.”

Mac nodded and went upstairs to check with Captain Fred Mullin, Homicide’s active head.

“How much have we got on the Malden lad?” he asked.

“His memo address book,” Mullin answered, “gave us a couple of leads. Malden had an office at Eleven Pine Street. Investments, brokerage and bond sales. One man outfit.” He reached across the desk, picked up the book mentioned and tossed it over to McClain. “Help yourself. Lots of phone numbers and addresses to play around with.”

“Thanks.” Mac tucked the book in his pocket. “I’ll wander back uptown and see if I can find where Malden came from before getting in Shramm’s heap.”

He went back to the street where the taxi had been parked. Standing there, at the curb, Mac thoughtfully stared up and down the block. Where had Malden walked from? Which direction?

If the dead man had bled profusely, McClain knew, it would have been comparatively easy to pick up his trail. But he hadn’t. With a shrug of his broad shoulders he went across to the same lunchroom where Charlie Shramm had stopped off and took a doughnut and a steaming cup of coffee to one of the armchairs.

While he stirred the coffee McClain thumbed through Malden's little book. As Mullin had said, there were plenty of scribbled telephone numbers and addresses. Mac combed through them, remembering the photo enlargement in the silver frame.

Finally, out of the book's pages, he selected two names and two numbers. One was entitled *Fran*, with a telephone in the Endicott exchange. The other said *Wilda*, and had a Rhinelander call number.

McClain used a booth in the rear of the lunchroom. Wilda's number didn't answer. He tried the other with more success. A clear, girl's voice came over the wire.

"Police business," McClain said. "Where are you located? I want to come up and see you."

"It's much too early for gags," the voice said. "Who is this?"

McClain hung up and then got the operator back again. The business office of the telephone company supplied the information he wanted. Twenty minutes later he was on the second floor of a five-story apartment building on 71st Street near West End Avenue.

He stopped beside a door numbered 2G. From the other side of it came the ripple of piano music. Not the boogie woogie of a jive specialist, the music McClain heard was classical stuff, strictly Carnegie Hall type.

THE pressure of the buzzer button cut it short. A quick tap of heels on a hardwood floor replaced it. The door opened and he looked into inquisitive dark blue eyes fringed with long, thick lashes. Sunny yellow hair caught and held the light streaming in from the window behind her. The girl was small, radiantly youthful, as pretty as Mac had seen off the screen or on any Broadway stage.

"Miss Hollister, Francisca Hollister?" The McClain authority was pushed over so

she could see it. "I called you awhile ago. The police business you thought was a gag. I want to talk to you."

She led him into the sunny room where the small grand piano he had heard stood with its keyboard away from the windows. It was a sparsely furnished room. She sat down on the piano bench. Mac looked keenly at her small, high-arched feet, the shoes she wore.

"You know Arnold Malden?" When she nodded, her white forehead wrinkling slightly, he added, "When did you see him last?"

"Yesterday—at noon. I had lunch with him. Why?"

McClain said tersely, "He had an accident. Before I tell you about it, you can give me some information."

She spoke slowly, worried he saw over the word "accident" that he had used. She said she was engaged to Malden, that she had known him for a little over three months. Then she cried softly:

"What do you mean—*accident*. What happened to Arnold?"

"He's dead—he was murdered."

The girl's hands went up over her pretty face. For a minute McClain thought she was about to faint. She slipped forward on the bench, steadied herself with an effort and peered at him with wide, horrified eyes.

"Ivan must have done it!" Strangled words seemed to tear from her quivering lips. "He hated Arnold! He told me I was a fool to have anything to do with him—that I was ruining my career!"

She stopped, sobbing, overcome with emotion. Mac fumbled uneasily among his battery of cigars. Finally he shook his head and let his hand come away empty.

"Who's Ivan?" he asked, quietly.

She told him and Mac got to his feet. He looked at her somberly. It was no act. He knew enough about emotional reactions

to know that these were genuine.

“Look, Miss Hollister. Don’t go away. A little later on my boss will want to ask you a few questions. How about your folks? Are they here with you?”

“I live alone,” she said, in a muffled tone.

“If I were you,” Mac said, “I’d go in and lie down. Take it easy for awhile. You’ll feel better later.”

From a drug store he phoned Mullin at Centre Street and then hopped a cab, giving the block with the lunchroom as a destination. All at once Mac’s spirits began to lift. Fran Hollister’s tears faded out of his mind. The bloodhound in him stirred. By a stroke of luck he had grabbed himself a straight lead.

The taxi stopped in front of an old fashioned four-story private house, one building in from the corner of the street. Paying the driver off, McClain stood in the middle of the sidewalk and stared west. Shramm’s rig, at the other end of the street, would be about a three minute hike for anyone under normal circumstances.

But a guy with lead in his gizzard and half a pint of alcohol in his stomach would take longer.

“Five minutes, anyway,” Mac said to himself. “Five minutes from the grave!”

Inside, on a vestibule directory, he found the name he wanted. It read, *Ivan Russov* and said, *Studio 3*. Mac went up a flight of narrow margined, uncarpeted stairs.

Two men in plaster-stained coveralls, with ladders, were working toward the rear on the landing above. They were doing something to the ceiling. Beyond them, a red light marked a fire exit. Mac skirted the ladder and came to a stop. A narrow flight of stairs led down. At their head were three tall galvanized-iron trash cans. They were filled to overflowing with chunks of the plaster removed from the ceiling. A

tarpaulin on the floor was sprinkled with more of the plaster that gritted under McClain’s oversized feet.

HE SUCKED on his cigar meditatively. Then, as he was about to turn away, he caught the blue glint of metal from behind one of the refuse cans.

Mac pushed the can aside and leaned over. Something hot and magnetic sprayed through him as if he had touched a live wire. The workmen weren’t paying any attention to him. He slipped one of Anna’s best ironing jobs out of his pocket, shook the handkerchief open and reached.

When it came back he had a gun in its linen folds. He scrutinized it intently. It was a *Smith and Wesson* target revolver, the kind called a K-22 Masterpiece. Mac knew it fired any of the .22 caliber rim fire, short, long or long rifle cartridges. Its stock was checked walnut with the familiar *S & W* monogram engraved on it.

The gun that had had a workout on Arnold Malden? McClain nodded to himself. He was certain he had the murder rod.

Tucking it away, he found Studio 3 across the corridor. Its door was directly opposite the building’s fire exit. Mac pressed the bell and watched the workmen.

The door opened. A voice said:

“Yes? You are looking for me?”

McClain stared into a pair of dark, beady eyes. They belonged to a lanky, flat-chested man. He wore a gray flannel shirt, green corduroy trousers, carpet slippers. A cigarette drooped from one corner of his small, tight-lipped mouth.

He had a narrow head, quantities of oily black hair shot with gray. It gave him a sort of wild, temperamental look. Mac noticed his slender fingers were nicotine stained.

It was hard to guess his age. He might have been thirty or fifty.

"You're Russov?"

"Yes. And you?" His voice had a flat, expressionless quality to it.

"I have an appointment with you—as of now. Police check up. How about letting me in?"

Ivan Russov stepped aside. Watching him warily, Mac was ushered into a fairly large room. Fran Hollister's living room had been sparsely furnished. This one, in addition to two grand pianos, was crowded with furniture, bookshelves, statuary and framed, autographed photographs on all four walls.

McClain gave the studio a swift, comprehensive glance. Russov didn't ask him to sit down. The man sucked in a lungful of cigarette smoke and rested against one of the pianos.

"What do you want?"

"Information. About a party named Arnold Malden. You knew him?"

"Certainly. He was here this morning—drunk. He woke me up. It was three o'clock. He wanted to come in and argue with me."

"About what?"

"A young lady. A pupil of mine. He is in love with her. He believes I am trying to break up his romance. He has threatened me several times." Russov shrugged.

"You've got a gun?"

"No."

"You've never seen this one before?" McClain pulled out the target pistol.

Russov gave it an indifferent glance. He said, "Firearms do not fit in with my line of work."

"Malden was shot last night. Killed." Mac spaced his words to give them impact. "In this building. With this gun. He was able to walk almost to the corner. Up to a taxi parked there. He got in it—with his last breath. And you're telling me you don't know anything about it?"

"Yes."

"Get your shoes on. You and I are finishing this up at Headquarters."

FOR the first time Russov lost some of his nonchalance. The beady black eyes widened. A flush of color crept into his thin face. He dropped the cigarette in a glass dish and said:

"You are arresting me?"

"Certainly not." Mac grinned. "Just taking you in for questioning. You and Miss Hollister. We want to know all about her relations with Malden and why you hated him so much that you tried to break up their friendship. Go ahead! Stick your feet into leather."

Two hours later, the fishy eyed, deadpanned Captain Mullin tipped back in his swivel chair at Headquarters and glanced at Mac.

"No good, Dave. Russov can't be budged. Sticks to his story. Says he had words with Malden through the door, turned him away and went back to bed. I gave him the full count but no sale. A tough baby."

"How about the gal?"

"Her, too. She admits being in love with Malden. If she's lying, it's a good act. Last time she saw him was at noon yesterday—like she told you. She was going to be married to him the first of next month."

McClain fingered the piece of lead extracted from Arnold Malden. Ballistics reported it had been fired from the K-22 he had found on Russov's landing. He turned it over idly in his hand, put it back on Mullin's desk and shook his head.

"Maybe the guy's leveling, chief. He had a motive, sure. He could even make it self-defense if he wanted. Malden tried to bust into his studio to beat him up. He gunned him to keep him off. It fits."

"No, it don't." Captain Mullin shook his head. "There were no prints on that

target revolver. People shooting in self-defense don't bother to put on gloves or wipe their prints away before getting rid of the weapon. And they wouldn't hold out on using that angle to hide behind. I'm turning Russov loose, the dame, too. You'll have to do better if you want it to stick."

"Okay." Mac moved his shoulders. "No sleep from three this morning, but that's all right. Let's see what I can do."

"Play it smart," Mullin told him. "And while you're doing that, find out where Malden got the ten grand he put in his personal checking account last Wednesday. Might have some bearing on his bow out."

"Ten G's?"

"Hartley raked over Malden's office at Eleven Pine. The bankbook was in his top drawer."

McClain went down to the squad room. He washed, combed his hair and, with a fresh cheroot fuming, walked out of Headquarters. He thought about the beady-eyed Russov. Mullin did funny things sometimes. Maybe he had deliberately turned Russov loose with the idea that the music teacher would cross himself up.

Maybe, Mac thought, the lanky man with the small, tight-lipped mouth had a yen for pretty Fran Hollister himself. Then Mac's thoughts centered about the ten-thousand-dollar deposit Mullin had mentioned. That didn't seem too important. In the brokerage-investment racket Malden engaged in, an amount of dough like that might have been a client's ante for some stock he wanted.

"Only," McClain said to himself, "why did he sock it away in his private account?"

It was after five o'clock when, following through on the other name conned from Malden's address book, he entered an apartment building in the East 50's. This was different from any of the stops he had previously made that day.

It was an expensive layout, higher class

than the place Arnold Malden had lived in. This building had an air of wealth and exclusiveness.

A liveried hallman tried to stop McClain from going up to the apartment he wanted, without being announced. He didn't succeed and a few minutes later Mac was on the thirteenth floor. He wandered down its heavily carpeted length, thumbed a button that produced chimes and looked into the broad, not too intelligent face of a maid who was adjusting her apron straps while she peered out at him.

"Miss Weston in?" When the girl said she wasn't, Mac, with a foot in the door, added, "I'm a friend of hers. She expects me. She's coming home soon?" When the maid nodded, he said, "I'll step in and wait."

THE girl didn't object. Which explained why thefts were so common in Manhattan, Mac thought, when she led him into an attractively appointed sitting room. She went out without further comment. He put his hat down on a polished table, rubbed his chin reflectively and started wandering around.

The telephone company had given him Wilda Weston's last name and address when he had supplied her telephone number. Not finding her home, to Mac, was something that might or might not be a lucky break. In any event he decided to make good use of his time.

From the sitting room he quietly opened doors. After a minute or two he found himself in a mauve-and-gold bedroom. The faint odor of perfume lingered on the air. He listened carefully. He didn't want the maid to find him there.

From some other section of the apartment he heard her moving around. Quickly, Mac pulled open more doors until he found the one he wanted.

He was back in the sitting room,

cooling his heels and down to the last inch of his stogy when a key grated in the front door's latch. The door opened and closed. A girl came in—slowly, hesitantly, curiously.

McClain remembered his manners and climbed to his feet. He had the impression of burnished, coppery hair. Of gray-green eyes, a skin almost golden in its warmth. Of curved, vividly red lips and a slender, streamlined figure that was set off to advantage by the smart light woolen dress she wore, the short, fur-collared jacket she slipped off as the gray-green eyes rested on him inquiringly.

She was poised and sure of herself. Every action and mannerism told Mac that.

"You're Miss Weston. I'm McClain. Plain-clothes detective from Homicide. I'm checking on murder. Arnold Malden's murder early this morning."

"You want to know—what?"

"When did you see him last?"

"In his office, last Wednesday." Her voice was fascinatingly husky. If she were surprised by her visitor's blunt, abrupt questioning, she masked it well.

"Why did you go to his office?"

"To invest some money."

"Ten thousand dollars, for instance?"

The gray-green eyes widened slightly. She seemed about to say, "How did you know?" and changed it to, "Yes, that's right."

"Then Malden was only a business acquaintance?" McClain gave her a sharp look.

"Only that. He made investments for me—from time to time."

Mac shook his head. "That doesn't stand up. Sorry: You'll have to do better."

"What do you mean?" Her tone quickened.

"Sit down, Miss Weston." He waved a big hand at the chair. "Let's talk this out. Last night you followed Malden. You

followed him after you said good-night to him. Maybe he told you where he was going—to a building in the Fifties. To see a party named Russov about a babe named Fran Hollister."

Wilda Weston pursed her lips. She smiled faintly. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

"That's all right. Few do—at first. I'll give you a memory refresher without charge. You tailed Malden because he was cutting loose from you and about to commit matrimony with one of Russov's piano pupils. The Miss Hollister mentioned. Stop me if I'm wrong."

She didn't say anything and McClain went on. "You had a gun with you, a twenty-two caliber job. There are two stairways in Russov's building. Front and rear. You picked the rear one and waited. Malden didn't get in to take Russov apart. So you went into action. You drilled Malden from one of the steps down from the landing, stashed the cannon back of one of the refuse cans there and blew in a hurry."

STILL the girl said nothing. Mac noticed her hands, slender and white. There was no movement to them, no nervousness.

"I figured it was an amateur's job. Because," he told her, "a real gunny or hood wouldn't let a victim walk away. They'd stick around and make sure he was blacked out before exiting. Malden was able to get down the stairs and almost to the corner before he went in for harp strumming."

Wilda Weston laughed. It was a low, amused little laugh. She walked over to the polished table where Mac's hat rested. She pushed that aside and took a cigarette out of a silver humidior.

"So this is a demonstration of theory and deduction?" she drawled. "How can you prove what you say?"

“That won’t be too rough. First, Malden is in a bathing suit picture with you up in his apartment. I don’t know. Maybe these brokerage guys take their clients out and get snapped with their arms around them, gazing fondly into each other’s eyes. But that was only a pale lead. I’ve been here for some twenty minutes. I had time to give the closet in the bedroom a gander. Lots of shoes in it. One pair interested me.”

She seemed to freeze. The golden face whitened a little.

“Shoes?”

“One pair with some plaster ground into the soles and heels. Stuff from the landing outside Russov’s door and on the rear steps. That’s important; rule one in anybody’s murder book. Clean your shoes when you walk on foreign matter that can be traced. Otherwise—trouble.”

He broke it off fast. Wilda Weston’s hand had dropped to the drawer in the table beside which she stood. She opened it and snatched a gun out of it in one smooth, quick move.

Wheeling, the gun drew a bead on Dave McClain!

He saw it was a copy of the K-22 he found back of the can. One of a pair. But he was more interested in the set of the girl’s mouth and what was in her eyes than the make of the weapon she gripped.

“I killed Arnold,” she said, her voice like ice, “because he was a liar and a cheat! Because he took my money, not to buy bonds, but to buy himself a honeymoon! I did a little private investigating myself. I killed him and I’m glad! But I’m not going to pay for it—he wasn’t worth it!”

“So,” McClain murmured, “you’re going to bump me and walk? Not far, Miss Weston. Remember, I said I was here for twenty minutes before you came in.”

Arched, narrow brows drew together. The lids came down over her gray-green

eyes. Mac’s heart was beating it out; eight to the bar. He didn’t know if it were going to work, but he figured it was his only chance.

A gal with a gun, keyed up as high as this coppery haired beauty, was twice as dangerous as any of the killers he had tangled with in the past. The rats he had mixed with played it out in orthodox fashion. This amateur murderess didn’t know the rules.

Sweat began to trickle down the backs of his ears. He had told his sister Anna to have dinner at seven. Anna was a good cook and he hoped he’d be around to eat it.

He drew a deep, silent breath and took the plunge.

“I’m allergic to bullets,” he went on in the same quiet, conversational tone. “In the twenty minutes I found something else besides the shoes in your closet. That target revolver you’re holding. I thought it might be an idea to do what the comedians advise—get the lead out. You’re holding an empty shooter, honey!”

She fell for it like a ton of brick. With a smothered exclamation the gun moved slightly away from McClain as her gaze dropped to it. His forward lunge carried him over to her. He had her pistol wrist in his big, tight grip before she could squeeze the trigger.

McClain tore the K-22 away from her and grinned.

“Sit down, Miss Weston, before we go slumming to Centre Street. In the future, if you happen to have one, take my advice.”

She didn’t ask what it was and he gave it to her, gratis, a minute later. Breaking the revolver and turning it so she could see the brass circle of cartridges in its chambers, Dave McClain said:

“When anybody tells you a gun’s unloaded, shoot before you see the white of his lies!”